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DU BOISGOBEY'S SENSATIONAL NOVELS.

III.

THE DAY OF RECKONING.

BY FORTUNÉ DU BOISGOBEY.

IN TWO VOLS.—VOL. II.

LONDON:

VIZETELLY & Co., 42 CATHERINE STREET, STRAND.

1885.

GLASGOW:
DUNN AND WRIGHT,
PRINTERS.



THE DAY OF RECKONING.

PART II.

I.

IN the army and on his estate of La Bretèche, M. Souscarrière had acquired the healthy habit of rising at break of day. He kept it up in Paris, and every morning before six o'clock had struck the few people passing along the boulevards would see him smoking a matutinal pipe at his window on the fourth floor of the Grand Hôtel. He did not remain there for long, however, on the day following his interview with the Count de Maugars—that interview made memorable by the declaration of war which the count's unknown enemy had launched forth. Smoking and thinking had no charms for the old soldier, now that he knew that his nephew, Guy de Bautru, could not marry Madeleine. He rather longed to act, and as he walked up and down his room he stamped like a war horse which hears the trumpet of battle sounding afar.

"Guy writes that he will be here this morning," he said to himself. "Morning to a Parisian means ten o'clock at the earliest. He is still asleep, poor fellow, and he has no knowledge of the trouble which awaits him. Nice news he will have when he wakes up—news that Estelan has come to life again! But I must lose no time in telling him what a pickle we find ourselves in. I shall never have the patience to wait for him here, so I'll dress and go and see him—and if I disturb him, well, so much the worse, that's all."

Without delaying any further Souscarrière dressed himself with all his usual care. Had he lived in the time of Napoleon the First, he was the kind of man who would have shaved himself regularly during the retreat from Moscow; and history has placed it upon record that the Count de Narbonne never once missed doing so, so that one may imagine there was some resemblance between their respective characters.

That morning the old soldier had particular reasons for taking care of his personal appearance, for he intended seeing several persons, notably M. Frédoc, and perhaps even Estelan; that is to say, a friend who had become an object of suspicion, and a man whom exceptional circumstances had made an enemy. So far as his visit to the Count de Maugars' son-in-law was concerned, Souscarrière had not yet been summoned either by the investigating magistrate or the prefect of police, and this delay somewhat astonished him. However, he decided to go forward the first and solicit

permission to talk with the prisoner whose misfortunes had caused so much suffering.

Souscarrière was just buttoning up a black frock coat, which although somewhat tight was none the less very becoming, for it showed off his soldier-like figure to great advantage, when he suddenly heard a loud knock at his door.

"Who the deuce can that be so early?" he growled as he went to open the door. "It can't be Guy, for he would have burst in without the slightest ceremony."

It was not Guy. On the contrary, Souscarrière found himself face to face with a gentleman whom he did not recognise at first, and whom he examined from head to foot before drawing aside from the door.

It was the stranger who put an end to this scrutiny. "I am Monsieur Aubijoux," he said; "you lately did me the honour of coming to a ball at my house, and I —"

"I remember you now, sir, perfectly well," replied Souscarrière, bowing; "I am delighted to receive you in my turn, although this hotel room can in no wise compare with your palatial abode." And as he spoke he drew aside, making a gesture which seemingly invited his visitor to enter the room.

"We are barely acquainted as yet, sir," said M. Aubijoux, "and my visit greatly surprises you, no doubt. You will be still more astonished when I tell you why I have called." Then, as Souscarrière made no rejoinder, the millionaire resumed: "The reason which has brought me here is a most serious one, and I would not have ventured to present myself if we had not had a mutual friend——"

"I was not aware of that," remarked Souscarrière, in a tone of surprise.

"I ought to have said a friend in whom I place full confidence, and who has spoken of you to me in such a manner that I made up my mind to apply to you under circumstances which affect my honour. I refer to Monsieur Frédoe, who would have followed me here if I could have waited until later in the day. But I was in great haste. I remembered an interview which we all three of us had together in my park, and I flattered myself that I was not altogether a stranger to you. So I resolved to go and speak to you on a somewhat delicate matter."

"May I be shot as a deserter," thought Souscarrière, "if I understand a single word of all this rignarole."

"I came to ask you," resumed the merchant, "to do me a service which, as a rule, a man only asks of his intimate friends—to help me in a matter which must be speedily concluded and which I hope to finish with a weapon in my hand. I will tell you what it is. My wife has been deceiving me. She has a lover. I surprised them together a couple of nights ago and I wished to kill both of them, but I only succeeded in wounding the miserable scoundrel who has turned my wife from her duty."

Souscarrière drew a long breath of relief.

"Yes," added M. Aubijoux, becoming more and more earnest in tone and manner, "on the night before last when I reached my house at Auteuil I found this man at my wife's feet. I had been travelling, and she was not aware of my return."

"The night before last," thought Souscarrière. "Now I know what he is talking about. It was the first night of 'Zaïrette.' Madame Aubijoux went to the Fantaisies Comiques, and that scamp of a Busserolles joined her in her private box. She must have taken him to Auteuil with her."

"She has now gone to her father's house," resumed the merchant,

"and there she may stay. I have not forgiven her, and I will never see her again. If I spare her life I shall not spare her lover's. In fact I intend to follow him until I kill him."

"In a duel, I presume?" said the cavalry officer, who had now fully gained his self-possession.

"Yes, in a duel in which either one or the other of us must fall."

"And you have done me the honour to select me as one of your seconds?"

"The honour will be mine, if you accept."

"I don't refuse, but I should like to know the name of the man whom you propose to fight."

"I do not know his name as yet."

"The deuce! that is very embarrassing. I cannot promise hap-hazard, like that. I must know who he is, and who is your other second."

"Listen to me, sir. I am aware that I am breaking through custom, and that you have a perfect right to demur. But you are a man of feeling, and you will not drive me to despair. I will tell you my true situation, and fully explain what I ask you to do. I idolised this woman. She has cruelly betrayed me. I am resigned to suffer, but I do not wish that her shame should become known. The scene in my park must remain a secret. Two men were present—one of them is my best friend, of whose discretion I am certain, and, as for the other, I will force him to hold his tongue. The scoundrel who has robbed me of my happiness, and whom I shall most certainly find, must necessarily belong to the society in which I move, and at least one of the bullets from my revolver hit him. He will be spoken of as wounded, and I shall then find out his name."

"I hope you do not suppose that I should inform you of it."

"No, of course not. But when I know whom I have to attack, I shall need a man who understands the whole matter, and who will direct it with prudence and authority. My aim is to obtain the satisfaction which is due to me, and at the same time to avoid publicity. I must therefore compel my adversary to fight me on some plausible pretext which will conceal the true reason of our duel. To conduct such an affair experience as well as tact are necessary. The friend whom I mentioned is a novice in such matters. I have fought duels before now, but as young men sometimes fight, for unimportant reasons, and without thinking much about the quarrel. If I found myself in this rascal's presence I could not control myself; and, besides, it is not customary for the offended party to go in person to demand reparation. According to custom, there must be intermediaries, who are called 'seconds.' It is absurd, no doubt, but the rules of society must be obeyed. This is why I have taken the very great liberty of calling upon you so early. You have served in the army, sir, and you will know very well how to regulate the conditions of the duel. Whatever they may be, you will have no reason to feel ashamed of me on the duelling ground. Of course, I might have applied to the first non-commissioned officer I met. In fact, I originally thought of doing so, for I hardly cared to commit an act of gross indiscretion by thrusting myself upon you, as it were. But I felt averse to confessing to a stranger the sorry plight to which an unworthy woman had reduced me, and to entrusting him with the duty of arranging a means of revenge which would not subject me to Parisian scandal. All that I know of you led me to believe that you would not refuse my request, and that, unusual as it might be, it would not shock you. Was I wrong?"

Souscarrière made no haste to reply. To tell the truth, he was very greatly puzzled. On the one hand, he did not wish to take up a delicate matter of that kind, and devote valuable time to it just then. M. de Maugars' troubles worried him a great deal more than M. Aubijoux's matrimonial difficulties, and required every hour he could dispose of. Still, on the other hand, he wished to conciliate the millionaire of the Boulevard Montmorency. Aubijoux was very intimate with Frédoc and Estelan, and Souscarrière hoped that he might obtain some information from him which would be useful as regarded both parties.

"I am greatly touched, sir," he replied, after a somewhat lengthy pause, "by the confidence which you have placed in me, and I shall endeavour to deserve it. I need not assure you that in any case what you have told me shall remain between ourselves. But, before undertaking the mission you suggest, I wish to ask you several questions."

"Speak, sir."

"I wish, first, to know why you did not at once apply to the gentleman whose name you mentioned at the beginning of this conversation. I refer to Monsieur Frédoc."

"I did not do so because Monsieur Frédoc cannot assist me at present, for he is very seriously indisposed."

"May I inquire if you have seen him?"

"Yes, I have; and I may tell you that it was he who advised me to apply to you."

"Indeed, I feel very greatly flattered that he should have thought I was able to serve you. You have known him for a long time, I presume?"

"For ten years; and I know him thoroughly. He is the most worthy man that I ever came across."

"May I ask you if he ever had any connection with the Monsieur d'Estelan who—"

"Who married the daughter of your friend, the Count de Maugars? No, sir. It is I who have been Estelan's friend from first to last."

"Do you know what has happened to him, then?"

"I have learned that he was arrested on the day before yesterday, and I immediately took the matter in hand. I went to see the magistrates who have charge of the affair, although I had such serious grief of my own, and I was fortunate enough to prove to them that Estelan is altogether innocent. He will be set at liberty either to-morrow or the day after. You can tell this to Monsieur de Maugars whenever you see fit to do so."

"Estelan free to-morrow!" exclaimed Souscarrière. "That is impossible! Monsieur de Maugars received a visit from the detective who arrested his son-in-law, and the man said nothing about all this."

"At what hour did he see Monsieur de Maugars?" asked Aubijoux.

"I don't know. In the morning, I suppose. Maugars told me about the affair when we dined together in Paris, in the evening."

"Then everything is clear. Monsieur d'Estelan was arrested on the day before yesterday, taken to the dépôt of the Préfecture de Police, and immediately questioned by the investigating magistrate. When the detective called on the Count de Maugars he was not aware of the result of the examination."

"He evidently believed that matters were progressing badly, for he did not hide his opinion that the affair would in all probability end at the assize court."

"Oh! matters changed during the course of the afternoon. Estelan succeeded in letting me know what was going on. I had not seen him for ten days. I had been travelling, and, in fact, I had gone away on his account. Fortunately I brought complete proof of his innocence back from Marseilles with me. I was ready, and went to the Palais de Justice. I saw the investigating magistrate there. I brought forward the honourable witnesses whom I had collected, and who only needed a word from me to give their testimony in favour of a man who was falsely accused. The magistrate became convinced that Estelan was the victim of an error, and he intends to repair the mistake as soon as he possibly can."

"You amaze me; and I really understand nothing about all this. How can the law be so misled? How is it that Estelan has waited so long to reveal his innocence? He is on the point of being arrested as he leaves church, he escapes, as if that were the best thing he could do. It may, if you choose, be explained by his dislike to go to prison; but then his first duty was to justify himself, if only to put an end to the agony of a grief-stricken family. But does he do so? Not at all; he hides away like a robber, he prowls about in the dark, and finally suffers himself to be taken, and then, scarcely does this happen, when he is found to be as white as snow. You must admit, sir, that all this is very strange."

"Yes, to those who don't know what occurred, after the first incidents of this deplorable affair. Let me tell you what happened. After Estelan had leapt from the window, at the risk of his life, he came at once to me."

"You told me that when I had the honour of being introduced to you in your park. You received him, then?"

"With open arms. While he was in Mexico he rendered me one of those services which a man never forgets, and I knew that he was quite incapable of an unworthy action. He told me his troubles. We discussed them together, and we formed a plan which we carried out in spite of all obstacles."

"It was a strange plan, indeed! For the first step left a charming young woman to mourn alone, without knowing whether her husband were alive or dead!"

"I will begin by answering that reproach. Estelan adores his wife, and I hope that she reciprocates all the affection which he feels for her. His dearest wish is to see her once more; and if it had depended upon him she would not have remained a single day in anxiety. But you know very well that the Count de Mangars believed in the odious accusations against his son-in-law, that he tried to compel him to blow out his brains upon the spot, and did not even leave him time to confound his calumniators, nor yet admit that a deferred justification could repair the evil which had been done. If Estelan had dared to go to Monsieur de Mangars, before settling matters with the law, how would he have been received, let me ask you?"

"Very badly, I confess. But it was precisely the ignorance one was left in that did all the harm."

"Very likely, but it was not his fault, I solemnly assure you. The theft imputed to him was committed at Marseilles many years ago. To discover the real culprit it was necessary to seek for him, and that was no easy matter. I may even say that, without my help, Estelan could not have found him. Thanks to the means which I possess, I had the hope of being able to assist him. But what was he to do while waiting for the

result of the steps which I took? Was he to surrender himself to the police? That would have created a stir for which the Count de Maugars would never have forgiven him. To see his wife again would have led to painful scenes. Estelan had but one course to follow, and he followed it. He hid while I directed the inquiries which were necessary in order to save him."

"He was hiding at your house during the whole time, then?"

"No. My house was not a sure asylum for him. I should have been obliged to let too many people into the secret—my servants, and my wife," added M. Aubijoux in a trembling voice. "But I have a friend who is as devoted as a brother to me, and who owns a lonely house in one of the Paris suburbs—a house which is taken care of by a person who can be trusted. It was there that Estelan took refuge after remaining for twenty-four hours with me. It was arranged that he should refrain from showing himself until I obtained a decision that the prosecution was null and void, and that he should then appear, head erect, and strong in his legally asserted innocence. We thought that all this would be done without any talk, and that Monsieur de Maugars, re-assured as to the consequences of the sad affair, would not hold out against a son-in-law who had suffered as much as he had done himself. And all that we hoped for would have happened as we thought if Estelan could have remained without attempting to see his wife till everything was finished, for the police would never have thought of looking for him at the little house where my friend, Le Pailleur, sheltered him. But it happened that, while buying his ticket for Vésinet, he was seen and arrested at the Western railway station.

"I thought so. We came very near catching him ourselves one night when he was running about in the woods near Maugars' villa. I regret that we did not catch him, for we should have forced him to explain. I should have induced him to leave France, and the scandal of the arrest would have been spared my friend. Now, even when he is set free, all Paris will know——"

"Nothing, sir, or very little, if anything. It will be known that the real thief has been captured, and that Estelan has never had anything to reproach himself with: but it will not be known that he has been in prison. The chief of the detective police told me so."

"You have caught the real robber, then?"

"Not yet. He has managed to escape, thanks to a concurrence of circumstances which I regret for more reasons than one, but he has been pointed out, and is actively sought for. He will be arrested in two or three days from now. He knows that it was I who denounced him, and he will revenge himself by defaming me. I will explain this to you later on, if you will consent to serve as my second; but I place Estelan's interests before mine. He is still more unfortunate than I am."

"And you say that this arrest is all that is waited for to set him free?"

"All. I hope that the order of 'null and void' will be given—but that seems impossible—even if the wretched Rangouze manages to escape the detectives."

"Rangouze, did you say? Is that a young man whom my nephew knows, and whom, deuce take it, I know too?"

"It is."

"But this Rangouze was at your ball, and I saw him at the play on the night before last."

"So did I. I sent for him to my box, and took him home with me."

"What! were you at the *Fantaisies Comiques*, then?"

"Yes; I knew that Rangouze would be there, and I went there to question him before handing him over to the law. I wished to make him confess his crime and I succeeded. He escaped me that night, but he will soon be recaptured, tried, and convicted."

"I cannot understand it. He committed the theft at Marseilles, then?"

"This Rangouze was employed as well as Estelan by a merchant whom he robbed. He changed his name——"

"So did Estelan, for the matter of that," said Souscarrière, under his breath.

"And came to Paris, where he became a money-lender."

"What! did my nephew associate with a man of that sort?"

"Oh! Rangouze had an agent who acted in his name, and all his friends at the club thought him a gentleman. They did not know that it was from him they borrowed at thirty per cent. Monsieur de Bautru was deceived as well as the others. He lately borrowed thirty thousand francs for thirty-three thousand without knowing that this scamp was the lender."

"That serves him right," grumbled Guy's uncle, "and as for Monsieur de Rangouze, I am not so greatly surprised, for I disliked him very much indeed. But let us return, if you please, to Monsieur d'Estelan, and allow me to ask you a question."

"I shall be happy to answer it."

Souscarrière, who now began to believe that Estelan was really innocent, was thinking of Frédoc, and hoped that he might learn from Aubijoux something that would enable him to make up his mind regarding the old bachelor.

"Did you know," he said, "that Estelan was supposed to be dead?"

"I was told that strange story yesterday by the officials. I knew nothing of it before, nor did Estelan himself. It is quite unimportant."

"It is far from being so, unfortunately. Monsieur de Maugars thought himself rid of his son-in-law, his daughter believed herself to be a widow, and very serious results have followed from this unfortunate mistake. Did Frédoc say anything to you about the suicide in the Bois de Boulogne?"

"No."

"Not even yesterday, when you saw him?"

"Not a word."

"But you spoke about it to him, did you not?"

"No. I went to see Frédoc in the morning, and I knew nothing of the affair until the afternoon."

"It is astonishing that he should have said nothing about a matter in which he played a part, and a prominent one, too."

"How was that?"

"He was riding on horseback with me along an avenue in the Bois de Boulogne when a man who was taken for Estelan killed himself. The letter which led to the mistake was found by Frédoc himself."

"Yes, I remember now that the magistrate brought up his name in connection with the circumstance. I think that he mentioned yours also."

"That is very likely, for as I just told you I was with Frédoc at the moment when the shot was fired. I expect to be summoned to the Palais de Justice and questioned as to this strange finding of the letter."

"You won't be, for no one cares any more about it, now that it is known that Estelan is alive."

Souscarrière, seeing that he was making discoveries now directed his

investigation differently. "You told me," he said, "that you had known Monsieur Frédoc for ten years."

"Yes, at least as long as that. We had business relations together during the last year of the Second Empire, and soon became still more intimate."

"You perhaps know what he was doing before the period when you became acquainted with him."

"He has always lived, as now, on his own money. He had a very fine fortune from his father, which he manages most wisely, although he is very generous, and gives largely to the poor."

"Did he ever speak of having lived in the country?"

"No. I am sure that he has never left Paris, where he was born, and that he will there peacefully end a truly honourable life."

"He is a widower, I believe?" asked Souscarrière, artfully.

"He? Oh, no! He has never married, and never will marry. He has very set ideas on the subject. Had I thought as he does, I should not suffer as I now do. If I had listened to him, all that has happened to me could not have occurred, as he said to me himself only yesterday; he even wrote me the same thing."

"Ah! he wrote to you?"

"Yes, to ask me again to go to see him this morning. He added, when insisting upon the necessity of a visit from me, that——"

"Have you his letter about you?" interrupted Souscarrière.

"Here it is," replied M. Aubijoux, taking out a pocket-book. "Read it, sir, and you will see what an excellent man he is, and understand why I came to you. The advice of such a friend as he is can be followed without fear of error, and he spoke of you in such terms that I did not hesitate."

"You embarrass me very greatly," replied Bautru's uncle. "I was curious to see Monsieur Frédoc's letter, because I have the harmless fancy that I can judge of people by their handwriting. But to read my own praises would prevent me coming to an impartial decision."

"Read, sir, I beg of you. I wish to prove to you that your friend approves of the step which I have taken."

Souscarrière had only hesitated for form's sake, for he did not wish to lose the lucky chance of seeing whether the declaration of war written to M. de Mangars was in Frédoc's handwriting. He wished the more to do this, as he hoped that it would divert all suspicion from a man whom he did not wish to mistrust. Frédoc pleased him, and he had the satisfaction of seeing, at the first look which he gave the letter, that Frédoc had not written the anonymous communications. The writing was not at all similar. Souscarrière, in order the better to play his part as an unsuspecting though inquisitive man, amused himself for a moment by talking of the indications which he perceived in the handwriting he was looking at.

"You don't, perhaps, believe in the science of graphology," he said, smiling. "But I believe in it, and I will prove to you that I am right. See! here are indications of goodness, sensibility, and generosity, and you know as well as I do that Monsieur Frédoc is the best man in the world. Here are other lines which show energy and volition of uncommon strength—for instance, the horizontal line of the signature and the firm way in which the T's are crossed. The lines look like sword strokes."

"Your diagnosis is correct," replied M. Aubijoux at once. "Frédoc

has a heart of gold, and a great deal of firmness. He never trifles with honour, nor with his own convictions."

"That is a merit somewhat rare now-a-days, and one which I greatly appreciate. I must ask you whether your friend is convinced of Estelan's innocence."

"I confess that I know nothing about that. I said very little to him about the young man's troubles, and I did not take any advice or ask for any in that respect."

"I remember, however, that in your park, on the night of the ball, we talked, in Frédoc's presence, about Monsieur de Maugars' son-in-law, and that after you left us Frédoc led me to suppose that he believed him to be guilty."

"That may be, still he was wrong; he relied upon appearances, as many other people do. But since then I have made no attempt to enlighten him about the affair. All that I have done for Estelan I did with the sole aid of my friend Le Pailleur. Frédoc knew nothing about it."

"Not even yesterday, when you saw him?"

"Not even yesterday. I only went to consult him as to the misfortune which has befallen me. We spoke of that only."

"But Frédoc knew this Estelan?"

"He met him once at my house, eight or ten months ago. I introduced them to one another. But they did not become acquainted any further. I do not think that they even met after that."

"Then Frédoc had no cause to bear Estelan any ill-will?"

"None; and I have never thought that he had any ill-will towards him. But may I ask you why you put these questions to me, concerning a man whom we both esteem?"

"You must, indeed, be surprised at the persistence which I show," replied Souscarrière, after a moment's thought; "and I will tell you frankly why I press you with questions which you have every reason to consider improper. This affair of Estelan's has mysterious points which I should like to clear up. Have you ever asked yourself who denounced Louis Vallouris? Or how this accuser discovered that Vallouris had become Estelan?"

"Yes, often; and I confess that I never found any satisfactory reply. Since I discovered the real culprit I have often thought it was he, but I did not long entertain that idea."

"There was no motive for doing so. Rangouze had every interest in not awakening any recollection of the robbery at Marseilles. The law of limitation would soon have shielded him, and it mattered little to him whether Estelan married Mademoiselle de Maugars or not."

"I am sure, besides, that they never met in Paris. If Estelan had found himself face to face with his old comrade Rascaillon—that is the scoundrel's real name—he would have recognised him, probably even have spoken to him, for he did not mistrust him; and he would have told me of the occurrence."

"And now that he knows everything, as you have told him everything, whom does he accuse of having betrayed him?"

"Some unknown enemy—a rival, perhaps. His marriage must have made many men jealous."

"A rival would not have waited till Estelan was married at the municipal office. But, tell me, has Estelan ever fancied that this unknown enemy might be Monsieur Frédoc?"

"Never ! Have you really thought that ?"

"I do not think so, now that I have spoken with you, but I confess that I have had that idea. You will say that it is nonsensical. But when persons are looking in all directions they form their opinions by mere chance. Monsieur de Maugars has had unheard-of misfortunes since this fatal marriage. He is struggling in a net woven by unseen hands. A man lurks somewhere who wishes to be revenged upon him ; we are sure of that ; and we are looking for that man, and we thought for a moment that it might be Frédoc."

"He ! but he has told me a hundred times that he did not know Monsieur de Maugars !"

"That is true ; and lately it only depended upon him to make the acquaintance. But I no longer suspect him now, and I have only to ask you if you have heard that Prunevaux, the lawyer, has bolted ?"

"No, but I am not surprised at that. Prunevaux tried to borrow a large amount from me three weeks ago."

"I know that. I was near by. Well ! he has carried off all Monsieur de Maugars' fortune."

"Oh ! that is dreadful !" exclaimed M. Aubijoux, sincerely grieved by the intelligence ; "that is too much ill luck. Fortunately, Estelan is not ruined ; he has a considerable capital of his own, and I am ready to help him in case it should not suffice to——"

"Thanks," interrupted Souscarrière ; "but Maugars will not remain without resources. By-the-way, Monsieur Frédoc must know something about that notary."

"Not that I know of. Frédoc used to go about a great deal, and has a number of acquaintances, but he did not esteem Prunevaux and kept out of his way."

A pause followed. Souscarrière, well pleased by Aubijoux's frank replies, was saying to himself that he had been altogether wrong in suspecting Frédoc, and resolved to ask no more questions. The time had come to decide as to what he should do concerning the matrimonial troubles of the millionaire. The outraged husband had set aside his private griefs to reply to the obstinate colonel's repeated questions. His case was but too clear, and Souscarrière could have saved him the trouble of searching for his wife's lover, for he had been at the play on the eventful night. But he did not wish to hasten the tragic conclusion which might be indefinitely postponed, and he had a great mind to consent to be a second, only as a means for trying to keep the wounded man out of Aubijoux's reach altogether. He was thinking of something to say of a conciliatory nature, when Guy de Bantru came in like a whirlwind.

Aubijoux, surprised by this sudden invasion, rose and waited. He had seen Guy at the ball on the Boulevard de Montmorency, but he did not recognise him, and Guy at first sight did not remember Aubijoux. He, perhaps, took him for some tradesman ; for the prince of finance was not very gentlemanly looking, and his frightened face facilitated the mistake.

It is certain that, like a mere madcap, Guy de Bantru—and this was ill bred, besides—interrupted what the colonel was about to say to the merchant by exclaiming : "Good morning, uncle ! I wrote to you yesterday that I should be here this morning early. You will never guess what I am going to tell you. That foolish Busserolles is wounded—wounded in the back with a shot from a revolver. Isn't that a pretty way to begin a love affair ?"

"But, devil take you!" cried Souscarrière, "don't you see that I am not alone? What kind of manners are these, and why do you burst in without bowing to this gentleman, who has done me the honour of climbing up four flights of stairs to see me?"

Guy, quite disconcerted by this reception, stopped short and saw that his uncle was making angry eyes at him. "What are you thinking of?" added Souscarrière, who perceived the threatening danger. "Must I mention Monsieur Aubijoux's name to induce you to treat him politely?"

Bautru now perceived that he had uttered some very thoughtless words. He had seen Busserolles the night before, knew the whole story, and now discovered a little too late that he had come upon the very husband whom his friend was suspected of having wronged.

"Excuse me, sir," he said, bowing awkwardly and stammering. "I did not recognise you at first. You are standing against the light."

"I see that you did not," slowly replied M. Aubijoux, who had grown visibly paler: "for had you recognised me, you would not have spoken of Monsieur Busserolles having been wounded."

"Excuse me, sir," replied Bautru, attempting to put a bold face upon the matter. "I do not see how that can offend you. Busserolles has had the misfortune to wound himself while playing with a revolver——"

"In the back?" mockingly replied the offended husband; "you must admit that this is very strange."

"No—the pistol fell and——"

"Spare yourself the trouble of absurd explanations. Your friend was wounded by a man who fired upon him while he was running away, and who regrets that he did not fire a more effective shot. I am that man, as you well know. I came here to ask your uncle to help me as soon as I discovered the coxcomb who injured me. I was looking for him, and I thank you for having told me his name. All that I have to do now is to kill him."

The uncle came to the rescue of the nephew, who looked very much abashed. "I am sincerely sorry, sir, for this misunderstanding," said Souscarrière, "and I can assure you that Monsieur de Bautru has no thought of giving you offence."

"I am sure of that, and I am not offended with him. I can even realise that you may refuse to be my second, if Monsieur de Bautru is to be second for this man. I only beg him to tell me how long it will be before his friend will be able to fight. Oh, don't attempt to deny anything," resumed Aubijoux, in reply to a gesture made by Guy; "it would be unworthy of you and perfectly useless. I know everything. I was at the *Fantaisies Comiques* on the night before last. Be good enough to inform Monsieur Busserolles that I shall not listen to any explanation whatever, and that he must at once name two of his friends who will see two of mine. Good morning, sir," added Aubijoux, addressing Souscarrière; "I am greatly obliged to you for the reception which you have given me, and am glad that I was able to inform you as to matters of interest to you."

Souscarrière, much affected, offered the merchant the honest hand which he was not in the habit of holding out to all men. Aubijoux went away with his head high, and Bautru did not attempt to prevent him, or expose himself to further rebuff.

"The devil fly away with you!" shouted his uncle, angrily, as he re-entered the room; "this is a pretty piece of business! With your

unheard-of recklessness you will be the cause of your friend Busserolles having to fight with this worthy man."

"It is fatality!" muttered Guy. "I did not recognise Monsieur Aubijoux as I came in."

"You ought to have recognised him," said his uncle, impatiently. "You are the more unpardonable from the fact that you talked with him for a long time in his park, not long ago."

"Yes, but he was disguised in a fancy costume, and there was the electric light. To-day, I took him for your tailor."

"That is no excuse for talking so imprudently. My tailor had no occasion to be informed that your friend Busserolles had met with this mishap. You are a perfect madcap."

"I was wrong, I confess. But I hope that the merchant won't carry things so far as he says that he will."

"You are mistaken. Aubijoux is perfectly determined to fight with his wife's lover, and I should not be surprised if he killed him. I don't think that your friend Busserolles is a war-god by any means. Do you think he is a good fighter?"

"I never saw him fight, but I don't doubt his courage. However, the duel cannot take place very soon. He has a ball in his shoulder, and as long as it is not taken out——"

"He cannot hold a sword, that is clear. We can gain time. For my part, I hope that the matter will have no bad results. How did it all happen?"

"Madame Aubijoux is a light-minded flirt, that is all. She imagined that life is like a novel, and found that Busserolles is as romantic as herself, so she struck up a flirtation with him; that is all it amounts to." She is not guilty of anything but frivolity. The husband happened to see Busserolles just as for the first time he took it into his head to go down on his knees before her, and he flew after him with a pistol-shot accompaniment, a perfect platoon-fire. Fortunately, Busserolles can run fast, and Madame Aubijoux managed to get out by a garden door that had been left open. She took refuge with her father, and, I think, she bitterly regrets what she has done."

"Aubijoux told me just now that he would never see her again. That is just what I should do if I were in his place."

"What a strange idea of his to ask you to be his second! He scarcely knows you."

"Frédoc sent him to me."

"Frédoc! You surprise me!"

"You will be much more surprised when you learn all I have to tell. Prepare yourself, my poor Guy, to hear bad news indeed."

"Are you speaking seriously?"

"Very seriously, alas! Didn't you meet Maugars last night?"

"No; when I left Vésinet he had not yet returned. I think that he must have slept in Paris."

"He had nothing more to do there, after hearing what I had to tell him when I dined with him. I brought him bad news, and he brought me still worse."

"Explain yourself, my dear uncle; you are killing me with suspense!"

"In the first place, Prunevaux has run away. He leaves more than a million of debts behind him. Maugars had all his money in his hands, and Maugars is ruined."

Bautru's face lighted up. "Is that all? From your look of grief, I thought that——"

"There's more, besides. Maugars is sixty, and people don't make a new fortune at that age. His daughter has nothing now."

"But she will be my wife, and no one can say now that I shall marry her for her dowry."

"Unfortunately you cannot marry her."

"Why? Has her father changed his mind?"

"It isn't that. Her husband is alive."

"Alive!—then, the dead man——"

"It was all a mistake. The man who blew out his brains in the Bois de Boulogne looked like Estelan, but it was not he. Madeleine's husband was arrested on the day before yesterday."

"I must be accursed!" exclaimed Bautru.

"I am beginning to think that we all are, and that the devil himself has taken our affairs in hand. We were near the end of our troubles and began to see the future all rose colour, and now everything is at sea! Screw up your courage, and try to bear this trouble like a brave man! You stand as you did when Madeleine married. Resign yourself as you did then."

"Then I did not love her; I had almost succeeded in forgetting her. Now I adore her, I live only for her and through her. And you talk to me of being resigned! No! I shall not resign myself. I will not abandon Madeleine to that scoundrel!"

"It is not certain that he is a thief."

"Are you going to take his part?"

"I have no desire to do so, but I must tell you the truth. Aubijoux has just declared to me that Estelan was the victim of an error of law, that his innocence is made clear, and that he will be set at liberty to-morrow or the day after."

"And you believe the assertions of this fool, who no doubt has his reasons for defending a friend?"

"He brought forward certain facts which are equivalent to proofs. He told me who the guilty man is, the man who committed the theft of which Estelan was accused. This man is about to be arrested, and there are ten witnesses to prove his guilt. As soon as he is arrested, the investigating magistrate will set Madeleine's husband at liberty. Consider all that I have told you to be fact, don't deceive yourself with vain hopes, and let us advise together as to what we shall do. Let us look calmly at the true position of things. There may, perhaps, be some remedy."

"Do you know of any?"

"Before answering you, let me say," resumed Souscarrière, "that Estelan will present himself at Maugars' house, no doubt, and will be very rudely received or not received at all. What will Estelan do then? Will he try to persuade his father-in-law, and touch his wife's feelings by the narrative of his misfortunes, undeserved as they are, or will he use harsher means? Will he have recourse to the law to oblige Madeleine to come under the conjugal roof? I don't know, but whatever he may do there will be a frightful scandal. Everybody will be talking of us—of you, of him, of me, and of Madeleine."

"What do I care! I would marry her if she were the divorced wife of a galley slave."

"The only thing that remains for you to do," replied Souscarrière,

without noticing this outburst, "is to enlist. Life would be very painful to you in Paris. You must go away. When you are in Africa, you will succeed in forgetting."

"Forgetting! Oh, no! But I have resolved to go away."

"Maugars, also, will go away. He has made up his mind to return to Louisiana, where he has a house and some lands. There, at least, Madeleine will be beyond Estelan's persecution. I don't say but what I shall go to join them. I don't propose to take you with me, as long as this man may live. You know very well that your presence would place Madeleine in a false position. But he may die, and, meanwhile, you will be winning your epaulettes in Algeria; and then, if you still think the same, nothing need prevent your resigning from the army, taking passage across the Atlantic, and becoming a colonist in the New World."

"All this is a mere dream!" said Bautru, bitterly.

"Who knows? All things come in time; we know that only too well. Maugars could never have foreseen that the son-in-law he had chosen would be accused of theft, and if any one had told us yesterday morning that this son-in-law would come to life again, we should have scouted the idea. Let us hope! let us hope!"

"I hope for nothing whatever, and I place but one condition upon my departure. It is, that before I enlist I shall have one last interview with Mademoiselle de Maugars."

"Her father won't refuse you that. But you had better not return to Vésinet until we know positively what is Estelan's fate. We shall know that in two days from now, so Aubijoux assured me."

"Does Madeleine know that her husband is alive?"

"I advised her father not to tell her as yet, and I think that he has taken my advice. Why be so afflicted before the time has come? The present situation cannot last. Madeleine will be surprised if you don't appear. To-morrow, Maugars will say that you are detained by a sick friend. We have forty-eight hours before us. Use them in making up your mind to the sorrow of a separation, which has become, I fear, inevitable. Don't abandon your wounded friend, but don't agree to be his second. We must not take a stand against Aubijoux. We shall need him. I am going to profit by this truce to look about me, to see what can be done to help our poor friend Maugars. Go home now, my dear Guy, and try to master your grief. Nothing is lost, my dear fellow, I repeat. I will see you soon again, and may, perhaps, have better news to tell you then."

II.

WHEN Souscarrière bade Bautru good day, he intended to use his time to good purpose. He had formed a plan which he longed to carry out, and as it was somewhat complicated he did not wish to delay putting it into execution. Poor Guy had been told quite enough. He had gone away broken-hearted. He did not need to know his uncle's projects, or the suspicions he had entertained concerning Frédoc, or the story of Rangouze. Why re-awaken sad thoughts by telling him all this?

Bautru would have hampered Souscarrière in the execution of the complicated plan which he had made, and which consisted in trying to make Estelan powerless, in endeavouring to discover the hidden enemy, the unknown promoter of all these disasters, and in giving the Count de Maugars a

fortune to replace the one he had lost by Prunevaux's ruin, so as to secure for Madeleine and Guy a destiny which would not be poverty, at all events.

The task was arduous, but it did not frighten the old officer. He now had the advantage of seeing the situation clearly. The happiness, the life of all those whom he loved depended upon the winding up of Estelan's affairs, and the manœuvres of the unknown accuser. Souscarrière's plan comprised a resolution to find out what would be the probable result of Estelan's arrest, to have an interview with the unlucky man, ask him his purposes, and also, as the aggressive letter to the count boasted of Prunevaux's ruin having followed his introduction to the "Grasshopper," to discover who had introduced him to her, and thus unearth the enemy. As for Frédoc, he suspected him no longer, but he might furnish information as to the Grasshopper's acquaintance with Prunevaux, and the investments in the operetta business.

Souscarrière reached the prefecture of police before it was opened, and had abundant time to admire the new buildings which surround the dépôt. In talking with Maugars he had learned the name of the detective who had gone to Vésinet; and when he asked to see him, a policeman took him to the investigating magistrate who had charge of the affair. The detective in question happened to be in the magistrate's office at that very moment. Souscarrière began by talking rather boldly; but the detective was not a man to be intimidated easily; and, besides, was not favourably disposed, having had nothing but disagreeable experiences in all that related to the Count de Maugars. The magistrate asked Souscarrière the motive of his visit; and when he knew it, and the colonel asked to see the man arrested the night before, he curtly but firmly declared it to be impossible. He could not sanction an interview between the prisoner and a man whom he did not even know; and whose connection with the matter was still unaccounted for. This last remark irritated Souscarrière so much as to make him lose all patience. He utterly forgot that he was speaking to a representative of the law, and finally declared that the police had acted with incredible recklessness from the very beginning of what he called "a most stupid business," and that they had been "led by the nose" by an anonymous accuser, who was making fun of them, and trifling with the peace of respectable people.

The detective, justly wounded, replied that the respectable people in question had only themselves to blame for all that had occurred; that the Count de Maugars, by his mad violence, had forced his son-in-law to fly when he could have justified himself and been at liberty in a few days; that the error as concerned the suicide in the Bois de Boulogne could only be imputed to the Count de Maugars' friends, as they had given the detectives the letter found beside the body, and insisted upon the immediate delivery of a certificate of death which would have proved false; and finally, that the least guilty in the whole matter was Louis Vallouris, called Estelan.

This conclusion reminded the colonel, who had brought about this rebuff, of the main object of his visit. He felt that if he continued talking in the same strain, he would not learn what he had come to find out, and so he grew calmer. He acknowledged that he had been in the wrong, and to excuse himself he spoke of the great interest which he took in the matter, and the sad situation in which his best friend was placed. He even had the artfulness to add that, as an old soldier, he could not

patiently bear a reproach which touched his honour, and that he had merely wished to explain that "inexplicable part" which he was accused of having played.

The detective, who had formerly been in the army, was touched by this observation, and assumed a kinder tone at once. He protested that he had no intention of wounding an old officer's feelings, and that he wished everything might be settled to general satisfaction.

Souscarrière, seeing the police official more tractable, next asked the magistrate if he could give him any information respecting Estelan's case, and the magistrate told him in confidence, that since the day before everything had turned out favourably for the young man. An honourable merchant had almost demonstrated Louis Vallouris' innocence; the true culprit was known; he was being tracked, and his arrest would very probably lead to the release of Mademoiselle de Maugars' husband, and that at once. The count and his friends would soon have occasion to thank the functionaries whom they had accused of negligence and recklessness.

Guy's uncle did not think it necessary to reply that neither M. de Maugars nor he would rejoice at the sight of Estelan, but he begged the officials to be more precise and tell him if the order of release would depend on the capture of the real culprit, Rangouze; and when he saw that the magistrate was not disposed to set Vallouris free before holding Rangouze he said no more, for he now knew all that had appeared doubtful to him. He limited his further remarks to asking that Estelan might be informed that an intimate friend of his father-in-law, Colonel Souscarrière, who was staying at the Grand Hôtel, desired to see him when he left the dépôt, so as to speak of his new position, and accompany him to Vésinet. The officials promised that the commission should be attended to, and they separated on the best terms imaginable.

Souscarrière went away well pleased at not having lost his morning. He now knew that the return of Madeleine's husband to his former position depended upon the arrest of Rangouze, and he trusted that Estelan, ignorant of what had taken place since his disappearance, would come and talk with him at the Grand Hôtel before presenting himself at M. de Maugars' house. The ex-colonel had a few hours, or perhaps days, to prepare for this disagreeable interview, and he was free to speak as he pleased to the man who was the obstacle to his nephew's happiness.

He breakfasted at a café, smoked and pondered awhile, and then took a cab to the Rue de la Bienfaisance, where M. Frédoc resided. He was received by Brigitte, who told him that Frédoc was seriously ill, and that the doctor had absolutely forbidden his seeing any one. Souscarrière accordingly resolved to call on Antonia, who would be better able than Frédoc to tell him—so he thought—who had introduced her to Prunevaux. But when he reached the Avenue de Messine, he found that the Grasshopper had gone into the country with a friend, and he now resolved to repair to the Rue Auber to see his nephew. As he did not find him at home he sent away his cab and resolved to wait. Five o'clock came, but Guy had not returned. Souscarrière at last came to the conclusion that the young fellow was detained by the illness of his friend Busserolles, and he did not care to go to the residence of that gentleman, in whom he felt but little interest.

Finding his day thus frittered away, the colonel now made up his mind to go to Vésinet, where Maugars would hardly be looking for him. He wished to tell him—for want of anything better—about his conversation

with the functionaries at the prefecture, and so he set forth without further delay for the Saint-Lazaire railway station.

He had been spending his time in looking for people without finding them, and now he was destined to see some one whom he had no idea of meeting.

On arriving at the station he found a crowd there. Chance had brought him there just before the departure of the five o'clock train, which is always laden with hundreds of Parisians of both sexes, bound for one or another of the various stations along the Saint-Germain line.

Vehicles were whirling rapidly into the court-yard and men from the Bourse in haste to reach their summer residences, city people longing for the sight of green trees, artists going boating in the evening, lovers starting away to dine on the grass, and "irregulars" in search of adventures crowded in front of the ticket office. Souscarrière placed himself bravely at the very end of the throng to take his ticket when his turn came, and found himself imprisoned between a young person, who turned affably every moment to smile on all around, and a fat housewife, who was carrying a lobster by a string.

At last he perceived a tall, slender young woman in an "excursion costume," a dress of Indian muslin, embroidered with tiny flowers, Montespan patent-leather shoes, which allowed a pair of red silk stockings to be seen, a parasol of blue satin, lined with scarlet, and a large "moss-nest" hat, covered with field flowers. This young creature's back was turned towards Souscarrière, but she was all the time in motion; she came and went, stared at the other women, and laughed when she saw that she was the object of attention. The first time that she turned round upon her high heels, the colonel recognised her. It was Antonia. She saw him and gave him a friendly nod, with a gesture which seemed to say: "I should like to talk with you, but I am not alone."

In fact, a gentleman now appeared, holding up two tickets, which he had just taken at the ticket window, and he joined the Grasshopper.

"Aha!" said Souscarrière to himself, "it is the Brazilian. I'm sorry that this nobleman from over the seas is with her, for I should have liked to find out who introduced the notary to her. But in Don Manoel's presence that could not be done. Besides, she has just given me to understand that she would rather I didn't get into the same compartment—so I understand her glance—and I don't care for it any more than she does—that tropical grandee doesn't suit me at all. What with his diamond studs and the ornaments on his watch-chain, he looks like a money-lender taking a 'day off.'"

While the ex-colonel pondered thus his turn came to get his ticket, and, this done, he found that the Grasshopper and her new admirer had disappeared round the steps leading to the waiting-room. Souscarrière did not attempt to find them; he even lagged behind, so as to lose himself in the crowd, and now everybody rushed forward to secure seats. The old soldier was obliged to take one at the end of the train nearest to the engine, in a carriage which was so far empty; but he did not remain alone for long.

Another passenger entered the compartment, a gentleman who was well dressed, but a great deal too much wrapped up for the season of the year. He wore a summer overcoat, and carried another and heavier garment of the same kind over his arm. A round hat with a broad brim shaded his face, and in front of him dangled a very large bag with steel

clasps, which was secured to his person by a strap passed round his neck. He was followed into the compartment by several other masculine passengers, and apparently for convenience sake he took his bag on his knees. Souscarrière, who was bending over his cigar-case, only saw the lower part of the strange passenger's figure. He noticed the bag, and observed that its owner was grasping it with both hands, and that he wore undressed leather shoes, with leggings of antiquated appearance.

The man with the bag, on his side, could only see the top of Souscarrière's hat, while the old soldier fumbled in his cigar-case; but as Bautru's uncle raised his head and showed his marked features, the over-clad gentleman rose at once and darted towards the door of the compartment to open it, scrambling as best he could over the legs of the other passengers. It is no easy matter to open a door when one has to put out one's head and shoulders to lift up the catch and turn the brass knob; and the gentleman who had been seized with a sudden desire to change his carriage had been too late in setting about it. The whistle sounded, the train was off.

"Don't get out. It isn't allowed. We are moving," said the guard.

The traveller, seeing that he was too late and in danger of breaking his neck, made up his mind reluctantly to return to his place.

Souscarrière was just lighting a superb regalia. He imagined that it was this which had put his neighbour to flight, so he said: "Don't you like tobacco?"

"I don't mind it," grumbled the strange individual, crouching into his corner and pulling his hat over his eyes.

"So much the better," said the colonel, "for I should have been devilish sorry not to smoke, and I thought that I had driven you away."

The strange passenger did not reply, so Souscarrière came to the conclusion that he was insane, and as he puffed at his cigar, he took to examining him closely. The costume which the fellow wore puzzled the old soldier greatly. He was as much wrapped up as if he were bound for the Alps, but the train went no further than Saint-Germain. He did not stir, but slept, or feigned to sleep, with his hands crossed over his leather bag. His closely shaven face was partly hidden by a pair of huge blue glasses with side pieces, but there was one very salient feature, a nose curved like that of a bird of prey, and not easily forgotten by one who had seen it previously. Souscarrière thought to himself: "I fancy that I have seen that nose somewhere or other before."

The train rumbled onward through the Batignolles' tunnel, and the compartment was plunged into darkness save for the colonel's cigar, which beamed forth like a beacon. It threw out a light each time that Souscarrière inhaled the smoke, and its intermittent gleams enabled him to watch the performances of the gentleman opposite, who now managed to place his bag behind him. When the train left the tunnel it was quite hidden by his overcoat, only a portion of the strap by which it was suspended being visible.

"Does that fellow there take me for a thief," thought Souscarrière. "He has hidden his bag as though he feared I was going to take it from him. It is probably full of gold and bank-notes. He has his whole fortune with him, unless, indeed—Hum! he looks like a bankrupt who has just put his key under the door, or a cashier making off with his master's gold."

The man was not sleeping, in reality. His eyes glittered behind his glasses, and although he kept perfectly still, it was easy to guess that he

was conscious of being scrutinised by Souscarrière, and that this scrutiny greatly annoyed him. The other passengers did not notice him. They were all busy reading the newspapers which they had just bought at the railway station. But the old soldier examined this strange fellow persistently. He was studying him, and making discoveries by degrees. He saw that his cheeks and chin were of a decided blueish tint, and, from this indication, it was evident that a razor had recently taken off a thick black beard, the colour of which did not correspond with the light hair visible under the man's hat.

It was evident enough, indeed, that he wore a wig, and yet that he was not old—thirty to thirty-five at the most. Why had he disguised himself, and where was he going tricked out in this style?

"Not near Paris," thought Souscarrière. "He has taken his precautions for passing the night on the road—two overcoats in the month of July, in such a heat! All roads lead to Rome—or to Belgium. I'll venture that when once he reaches Saint-Germain, he will hire a vehicle to take him to Pontoise, and catch the Northern Line there. What a shame that, instead of meeting this fellow whom I don't know, I didn't come across Prunevaux running off to the frontier. How I would have collared him! But this chap hasn't got Maugars' fortune in his bag, and I am a fool to trouble my brains about a thief making off with his plunder. These little accidents don't concern me. I didn't enter the police corps when I left the First Regiment of Chasseurs."

With this conclusion Bautru's uncle was about to turn his thoughts to other subjects when he recollected a singular circumstance. The suspicious-looking traveller had tried to make off as soon as he had caught sight of him. He must, therefore, know him, and wished to avoid him. Souscarrière, now more puzzled than ever, resumed his examination, and this time he concentrated his attention upon the passenger's prominent nose, which had first recalled a vague remembrance to his mind. After a minute or two, however, the truth flashed upon him.

"Yes," he thought, with his eyes still fixed on the betraying nose. "I know him now, it is that scamp Rangouze! How is it that I did not think of him before? Aubijoux was telling me about him this morning. Zounds! I can see why he wanted to make off when he saw me. He wishes to get out of the country, and doesn't care to travel with me. I have guessed rightly. He knows that the police are after him. He suspects that the passengers are watched on the main lines; he thinks that he won't be looked for in a suburban train, and so he has taken a ticket to Saint-Germain. He would have escaped if his evil star had not brought him into this compartment, just in front of me, but I have him now, and it depends upon me to prevent him from crossing the frontier. He is pretending to sleep. I shall begin by waking him up."

With this determination, Bautru's uncle was about to stretch out his hand to awaken the pretended sleeper, but ere he could do so, a new idea occurred to him. The place was not a fit one for calling the delinquent to account. What could he say to Rangouze in presence of six passengers who knew nothing about his evil deeds? A discussion would arise between himself and the rascal, and it was doubtful whether the other persons present would support him. Parisians going into the country to amuse themselves do not care to interfere in unpleasant scenes.

Souscarrière thought of all this, and resolved to temporise in order to proceed more securely. It would be better to wait until the rascal

alighted, get out with him, and oppose his leaving the station. There are almost always some policemen or gendarmes at hand when trains come in, and these worthy fellows would, no doubt, listen to an ex-officer, who would prove his identity by showing his card and the red ribbon in his button-hole. The least that they could do would be to take the accuser and the accused before the local authorities, and nothing more than this would be necessary to prevent Rangouze from escaping. A telegram would inform the prefect of police, and then all would be done.

Besides, a clever police agent would at once see that there was something suspicious about the man's wig and blue spectacles. He would ask to look at the contents of the leather bag, and would certainly find that it contained an amount of property which honest people are not in the habit of carrying about them when they go to examine the machinery at Marly, or to dine at the Pavilion Henri-Quatre.

"It is decidedly better," thought Bautru's uncle, "to be patient. My man thinks that I don't know him. I will dog his steps and catch him at the right time."

The train was now approaching the Asnieres bridge, and Souscarrière still had time to make preparations in case Rangouze should undertake to leave the carriage at the first stopping-place. He got ready, but his thoughts insensibly took a new turn. He began to think of the consequences of the arrest of the scamp whom he had detected. The most certain and important would be the release of Estelan. Aubijoux had declared, and the magistrate had confirmed his declaration, that this would follow upon Rangouze's capture. But if, on the contrary, Rangouze escaped, Estelan would remain where he was, for a time at least. Souscarrière had now to choose between these alternatives. Would he serve his friends better by giving Rangouze up or letting him get away?

He hesitated to decide this question, which was now presented to his mind for the first time.

Estelan, if he were cleared, could assert all his rights. There was nothing to prevent him from going to the villa at Vésinet—and he knew where to find it—and calling upon his wife to follow him. How could this be refused, and how was Madeleine to be apprised of the resurrection of the husband whom she believed to be dead? The news might kill her, but if it were concealed, and her father took her away, what a terrible scandal would follow!

Souscarrière had flattered himself that he could prevent all these misfortunes by his characteristic plan of fighting with Estelan and running him through the body, but the chances of a duel are always uncertain, and, besides, Estelan was not obliged to notice the challenge. How could he be forced to do so? Could the colonel go to meet him as soon as he left prison, and drag him upon the duelling-ground before he went to Vésinet? That would be absurd. Had not his nephew asked that his rival might be let alone, preferring to lose Madeleine and die of grief to being thought a coward?

On the other hand, however, if Estelan were not freed at once, the crisis would be put off. M. de Maugars would have time to prepare his daughter for her inevitable misfortune, and take her to America with him. Bautru would enlist, and he, Souscarrière, could return to La Bretèche without finding himself face to face with the cause of all this trouble. And, whatever might happen after that, cruel sorrow would be spared to all. If Estelan's affairs turned out badly, they would not hear

what might be said about the lawsuit. If an order of release were given after a certain period of detention, Estelan would find no one at Vésinet, and would have no other course to adopt than to disappear.

These considerations occupied Souscarrière's mind until the end of the bridge was reached, and when the train began to slacken its speed, he had almost made up his mind to let Rangouze go on. The money-lender did not stir as yet, but he was perhaps preparing to leap out as soon as the station was reached.

However, on looking at the rascal again, the old soldier began to think that while he was thus tampering with his own conscience a man was incarcerated between four walls, undergoing the shame and privations of imprisonment, and waiting in agony for the capture of the wretch who now sat in that railway carriage. Souscarrière reflected, moreover, that this prisoner was innocent. Yes, innocent. Aubijoux had made it clear, the detectives and the investigating magistrate acknowledged it, and they were about to release the prisoner.

What mattered Maugars' interests and those of his daughter? Was it Estelan's fault if they suffered? Did he not suffer as well, although he had nothing to reproach himself with? Was he to be allowed to suffer when it only depended upon him, Souscarrière, to hand the guilty party over to justice?

"No," muttered the old soldier, throwing his cigar out of the window; "no, it shan't be said that an ex-captain of the First Chasseurs d'Afrique made himself the accomplice of a thief. Guy himself will approve of what I have done when I tell him that I have caught this rascally Rangouze. No matter what happens, our honour will be safe."

At the moment when Souscarrière came to this final resolution the train drew up beside the station. Rangouze had not yet risen from his seat, but, from certain movements of his hands and feet, Souscarrière guessed that he intended to slip off as soon as the way was clear. He held on to the strap by which the precious money bag was secured, and he was drawing his legs under him like a cat about to spring. The doors of the adjoining carriages were being opened, and the noise of the arrival was heard. Asnières is one of the most frequented suburban resorts. Numbers of passengers alway alight there, and the platform was now crowded with people anxious to reach the exit.

Souscarrière thought that if he allowed his man to mix with the throng, he would run great risk of losing him. The time had come for striking the great blow, for Rangouze was getting ready to rise.

"Excuse me," said the colonel; "I am sure, now, that I am not mistaken. I am speaking to Monsieur Jules de Rangouze, am I not?"

On hearing this, the scoundrel reddened to the roots of his wig and attempted to break away, but Souscarrière had placed himself in such a way as to stop him from passing, and so he made up his mind to reply:

"Yes, sir, but I do not know to whom——"

"You are speaking? Good heavens! is that the case? Why, I have been looking at you for the last ten minutes, and I recognised you a second or two ago. We met but a short time ago—on the night before last, at the first performance of 'Zaïrette,' at the *Fantaisies Comiques*."

"Oh, yes," exclaimed Rangouze. "I owe you a thousand apologies! I did not notice you when I came in, and I went to sleep at once. I am really inexcusable. These confounded glasses of mine prevent me from seeing clearly."

"They at first prevented me from recognising you. You have not the same appearance at all."

"They annoy me dreadfully, but my physician forbade my taking them off until he gave me permission to do so."

"Have you anything the matter with your eyes?"

"Yes, I took cold on leaving the theatre, after seeing that ridiculous operetta."

"It won't be anything. I know what it is. I had just such a cold in Africa from sleeping in the open air while I was on an expedition. You must rest yourself and take care."

"I was told that it would do me good to go into the country for a time," said Rangouze, who was beginning to recover from his great fright. Souscarrière's tone reassured him.

"That's true. I congratulate you on going there, as I have had the pleasure of meeting you."

"I shall be delighted to travel with you, colonel, but not for long, as this train does not go beyond Saint-Germain."

"Good!" thought Souscarrière; "the scamp wishes to make me believe that he is bound on a mere pleasure-trip, and at the same time he is trying to find out where I am going, so as not to get out where I do. But I am as cunning as he." And he resumed aloud: "We shall be at Saint-Germain in forty minutes."

"Are you going there, colonel?" asked Rangouze.

"Yes, my dear sir. Where are you bound for, pray?"

"Not there. Further on."

"So much the worse. I should like to travel with you all the way."

The train started off again. Of the other passengers two had remained, and they had settled themselves in the corners near the door. Souscarrière and Rangouze could talk more freely. However, the ex-colonel took good care not to make a direct attack. He saw that he need not hurry, for Rangouze could not guess the true state of affairs. He could not divine that Aubijoux had told everything to Bantru's uncle. In fact, he was only thinking of explaining his disguise, and hoped to get out of the scrape by a few dexterous falsehoods, as, for example, the story of his cold in the eyes.

Souscarrière, who divined what he intended to do, proposed to keep the thing up until his man tried to leave the train. He had resolved to get out when he did, and then take him aside and give him the choice between two alternatives: to follow him willingly or by force.

Rangouze could not, of course, foresee this conclusion to the matter, for he had no very lofty idea of the shrewdness of a man to whom he had told so ridiculous a falsehood, and he intended to leave him as soon as possible. He had succeeded in escaping from Aubijoux the night before, and had not lost a moment since then. He had gone straight home to the Rue de Madrid, rightly guessing that Aubijoux would not follow him there until the morning.

A deceived husband thinks of revenge first of all, and, in point of fact, the unfortunate merchant had passed the rest of the night in looking for his wife, while Rangouze was shaving off his beard, and transferring his gold, bank-notes, and important papers to a bag, which was, of course more portable than an iron safe. The scamp was off before dawn, to the house of a native of Marseilles with whom he was acquainted, a fellow who kept a little grocer's shop in the Rue d'Amsterdam, and this fellow townsman

whom he had sometimes obliged by lending him money—at a high rate of interest, of course—had willingly given him shelter without asking any questions.

Rangouze had threatened Aubijoux with publishing Madame Aubijoux's adventure everywhere, but this was only an expedient devised to get out of a bad plight. He felt that all he could do was to fly, taking his fortune with him, so far as it was in hand, and abandoning what was due to him. So, after spending thirty-six hours in a back shop, and having learned that some suspicious-looking persons were prowling about, he had resolved to escape by the Saint-Germain train at an hour when there is a crowd of passengers. He had relied upon there being no detectives about, and he was not wrong in his supposition. But he had not expected to see Souscarrière, who had him in his power, and who now, laughingly exclaimed: "I understand your wearing blue glasses, but why in earth's name have you shaved off your beard like an actor. It suited your face, and I can't imagine why you have sacrificed it. Your friends won't know you."

"Well, really," said Rangouze, with a careless air, "I should be puzzled to tell you why I shaved it off. It was a fancy which came into my head yesterday while I was looking in the glass. I thought that I should look younger without it. But I am sorry now that I shaved it off, for I look very ugly without a beard."

"Well, you are right, for you certainly looked better with your hairy appendage. Excuse me if I speak plainly, but I always do."

"You are an old fool," thought Rangouze to himself, at the same time becoming more and more at ease.

"But you had your own reasons no doubt," said Souscarrière, laughing.

"I imagine that you did it to please some woman: they have such strange whims, women have! I know some who are fond of huge beards, and others who can't look at a man who has not a smooth chin."

"I see, colonel, that you find out everything."

"I was sure of it, and I think that I can guess to whom you have offered up your beard as a sacrifice."

"Indeed!"

"Why, certainly I can! I have not forgotten that a mysterious messenger came to fetch you at the theatre the other evening."

Rangouze could not hide a nervous grimace. The recollection which the old soldier thus revived was particularly disagreeable to him.

"You know that a lady sent for you," resumed Souscarrière.

"No! no! I assure you that you are mistaken," answered the native of Marseilles, with an affected air of modesty.

"Oh, don't be bashful, now! I saw what I saw, don't tell me that I didn't! And if I chose I could tell you the name of the charming person who sent an ambassador to you—an ambassador clad in black."

"Colonel, I beg of you——"

"Be calm, I will whisper it to you."

And, putting his hand upon Rangouze's shoulder to draw him nearer, Souscarrière leaned forward and whispered in his ear: "Aubijoux."

The scamp started as though a serpent had stung him. He thought that the colonel alluded to the husband, as he had made no mention of the sex.

"Not at all," he exclaimed. "I scarcely know him."

"Better than you will admit: but I am not talking of the husband. Come now, confess; my dear sir, that the wife is one of your friends."

Rangouze's face lighted up, and an evil smile played on his thin lips. As he imagined that Souscarrière was making a mistake, he was not sorry to take him still further from the right track, and at the same time to aim a Parthian arrow at the millionaire who had played him the nasty trick of denouncing him to the police.

"Even if it were true," he murmured, "you will understand, of course, my dear sir, that I should not admit it. I am a gentleman, and a gentleman never compromises a woman who has to keep up appearances."

"All right! all right!" answered the colonel, "I don't insist upon knowing any more, but I congratulate you sincerely. She is charming."

While the old soldier spoke in this style, he was thinking to himself: "What a contemptible rascal! He revenges himself upon that worthy Aubijoux by slandering his wife!" Then he resumed aloud: "Just to think that during 'Zairette,' we all fancied that her lover was that insipid, light-haired fellow who is a friend of my nephew, that Busserolles, who looks like an asparagus with butter-sauce! I see, now, that she had better taste."

"I assure you, sir, that the lady——"

"But still I think that she is a trifle eccentric. She has exacted a great many sacrifices of you, for it is undoubtedly owing to a whim of hers that you have put on a wig."

"Hush!" whispered the Provençal, "I have a reason for disguising myself to-day."

"Bah! does she—yes—of course—she is waiting for you in some little cozy nest in the country—a dinner under the trees—a sentimental walk in the woods—and it is easy to see that you won't go back to Paris to-night! Happy conqueror! you have taken your precautions—a summer overcoat and a winter one besides,—you don't require anything more except one of those cloaks they wear in melodramas—the colour of a stone wall."

"You are a great joker, colonel," sneered Rangouze, "and you have a vast deal of penetration. If you were a detective, and I a malefactor, I should not like to meet you."

"Bah! I'm not so smart. Now, I can't guess, to save my life, what you have got in that big bag, which looks like a valise."

"Some toilet articles," replied the usurer, who had an answer for everything.

"You are right to take them with you. I see, my dear sir, that you have not forgotten anything. That's because you are accustomed to love adventures. We soldiers are perfect savages. I must really get the 'Vie Parisienne,' and study it a little before I return to La Bretèche."

Rangouze laughed heartily. He was quite at ease now. Still, while he was answering the lively colonel, he did not lose sight of his intention of getting rid of him on the road, and he asked himself at what station he should alight, for he did not care to go to Saint-Germain now, as Souscarrière would be greatly in his way there.

The old soldier had upset his original plan, but he decided he would take the next train after an hour's stoppage at some point along the line.

"I shall have time to get to Pontoise this evening," he thought, lovingly caressing his money-bag; "and I shall not have this old trooper at my heels. If I reached Saint-Germain at the same time as he will, he would perhaps offer me some absinthe at the officers' café, and I should have all the trouble in the world to get rid of him."

The engine tore along the line, in full view of the fortress of Mont Valérien. It was approaching Nanterre, and Souscarrière, who remembered how he had often commanded a party of scouts in Algeria, kept a good look-out, so as not to be surprised by any sudden move on the part of the enemy. At a hundred yards from the station, he rose and looked out of the opposite door, and seeing a policeman who was quietly walking about on the platform, he said to himself: "If the scamp stops here, he won't go any further."

While he was thus looking at the railway station, Rangouze was anxiously deliberating. He was somewhat tempted to alight there, but he reflected that he had no need to be in a hurry. There were three railway stations to choose from before arriving at the end of his journey, and he thought that it would be better for him to get out at the most frequented one, where there would be the least chance of attracting attention while he waited for another train.

Rueil or Châtou would be better than the village of Nanterre, which is seldom visited by any one, save once a year, when some youthful virgin is crowned with roses as a reward for her good conduct.

"What a wretched place for lovers!" exclaimed the colonel, resuming his seat. "I am sure you are not going there. There are no trees, and you like trees, I presume."

"Oh, yes—trees, water, and grass."

"Then I know where she is waiting for you. There are some pretty little houses on the hills at Bougival—houses with terraces, from which you can hear the ripple of the river and the soft songs of the boatmen."

"Well, yes, that is about the style of thing I like," replied Rangouze, with a modest smile.

"The deuce take it! I should like to be in your place. I am going to dine at Saint-Germain with an old comrade who invited me to the officers' mess, and I am afraid of the cookery that they have there."

"Nanterre!" called out the guard.

The two other passengers now left the compartment, and Souscarrière found himself alone with the good-for-nothing fellow over whom he was mounting guard. The decisive moment had come, for it was evident that Rangouze would not go beyond Châtou, and the old officer employed the remaining time at his disposal in adroitly questioning his companion on certain points which he had not lost sight of. "You were not at the supper given after the first performance of 'Zaïrette,'" he said, in a lively tone. "You had something better on hand that night. Would you believe that I accepted Mademoiselle Antonia's invitation? At my age, it is simply ridiculous, but I suspected Prunevaux of being the backer in the operetta business. I came across him behind the scenes, and I wanted to find out if he would venture to show his face at the supper."

"Did he?"

"I believe that he did, although I did not see him there. I went away before the little affair was over. What do you think of that notary?"

"I think that he will come to grief."

"The singer is merely laughing at him. She is in this train now with a foreigner, a Brazilian, who belongs to your club."

"Don Manoël? The man who plays so heavily?"

"Yes. He has won a lot of money from my reckless nephew."

"You say that he is in this train?"

"Yes. He passed by with his fair lady while I was in the waiting-room."

"That is a good thing for Prunevaux, for Don Manoël will absorb the Grasshopper's attention."

"Let us hope so. But how on earth did Prunevaux happen to fall in love with her? Did he go into the same circle that she frequents?"

"Not that I know of. He came across her one day when we were all dining in a party at Bignon's, and he stared so hard at her that we invited him to join us."

"Do you remember who else was there? Who introduced him to Antonia?"

"I'll tell you. We were five or six in all. There was Bussacrolles and Girac and Métel and your humble servant and—who else——"

A whistle interrupted the enumeration. The train had reached Rueil.

"Excuse me, my dear sir," said Rangouze, "I am obliged to leave you. I don't remember the names of the other persons who formed our party, but as you care to know them I will tell you, if I succeed in recollecting them, the first time I see you again."

The scamp was already on his feet. Souscarrière did not detain him; he left his place and approached the window to find out whether the station was watched by any representatives of the law. Instead of one gendarme, there were two upon the platform. "Aha!" said the old officer to himself, "I was right!" and he added aloud: "You are going to Bougival. Zounds! I envy your lot, and I would give a couple of louis to take a dip in the Seine. The water must be good. It is hot enough to cook eggs. Wait till I open the door for you."

"I hope I shall have the pleasure of seeing you soon again, colonel," said Rangouze, making haste to get out of the carriage. "I am delighted at having had the pleasure of travelling with you." And, with his hand on the precious money-bag, he sprang out of the compartment without touching the step.

However, to his great surprise, Souscarrière jumped down after him.

"The devil take the officers' mess!" said the old soldier. "I shall go and take a bath in the Seine, and dine at the first restaurant I come across. I don't invite you, because I know that you have an engagement, but I will enjoy your society for five minutes more."

"Five minutes, and no more," grumbled Rangouze, "for I am going to take the tramway that is leaving the station." The rascal was greatly annoyed.

"Don't mind me, sir," replied the colonel, slipping his arm through Rangouze's. "I will only go with you to the tram."

At the same time, he managed to get near the gendarmes who were looking at the passengers leaving the station.

Rangouze did not dare to free himself, but he felt extremely angry, although he was far from suspecting the risk he ran. It was not possible to walk fast owing to the crowd. The people who were in a hurry were trying to get ahead, so as to be the first to reach the tram-car stationed below the embankment.

In the rush Rangouze was so violently pushed from behind that his hat and spectacles came off, and he almost fell himself. Souscarrière had had his share in the shock, and he turned quickly round to speak to the awkward fellow who had thrown himself against Rangouze just as he was about to finish the matter which he had in hand with the rascal. To his

very great surprise, however, he found himself face to face with Antonia and Don Manoël.

The two lovers were not hurrying at all, but they also had been pushed, and the Brazilian, against his will, had been thrown forward upon Rangouze.

"What, is it you, colonel?" exclaimed the Grasshopper. "Oh, how glad I am to find you again! Just imagine, down there, at the ticket office, I did not dare speak to you, but Monsieur de Rio-Tinto, who is with me, has not the least objection to——"

She suddenly perceived that Rangouze was close by. He had stooped down to pick up his hat and spectacles, and as he rose had turned completely round. Antonia burst out laughing at sight of him.

"Well, this is too much!" she exclaimed, "Rangouze without a beard! Rangouze with a light wig! Where did you get that head, my dear? Where in the world are you going in such a make-up as that? Are you going to parade at the door of Markowski's ballroom?" And she seized his coat-sleeve and drew him on. Souscarrière held him on the other side, and with so firm a grip that Rangouze was obliged to go with him. Don Manoël kept beside Antonia. In this way, at the end of ten seconds or so, they all four found themselves under the verandah of the railway station.

Rangouze looked pitiable enough, and Souscarrière was greatly vexed by this encounter, so ill-timed for everything. He looked askance at the gendarmes who were pacing slowly up and down near the exit, and was dying to call to them to come up, but there was no way of escaping the Grasshopper, although he relied upon being able to shorten the conversation.

"Monsieur Rangouze is not very well," he said, curtly. "He is going into the country for a few days, to rest himself."

"Did the doctor tell him to shave off his beard and wear a wig? What a strange prescription! But I beg your pardon, colonel. I spend my time in laughing instead of introducing you to Don Manoël—but no! I need not introduce him, after all, for you took supper with him at my house. Still, let me tell you that he is not a jealous admirer, and likes to become acquainted with all my friends, of whom you are one. Rangouze is another, although I can't forgive him for shaving off his moustache."

And turning gracefully towards her cavalier, who contented himself with smiling blandly, Antonia said to him:

"Do say something, for mercy's sake! Tell these gentlemen that you are delighted to meet them."

"I am sure that they do not doubt of that," exclaimed the foreign nobleman, "and to prove it I hope that they will accept a couple of seats in my carriage. I have hired a large brake which is waiting for us on the road."

Souscarrière said nothing, and Rangouze, as puzzled as he, shifted from one foot to the other without replying.

"Good!" said Antonia, clapping her hands. "Now, that is very nice of you, Don Manoël, to invite my friends, and you will enjoy yourself all the more, for they are very lively, and we shall have a much better time of it than if you had made love to me all day, you know."

"Excuse me, mademoiselle," said Souscarrière, "but——"

"I understand, before you promise, you would like to be told our programme. Here it is. Monsieur de Rio-Tinto wishes to know the suburbs of Paris somewhat better, and especially those where any fun is to be had. We have come to explore La Grenouillère and its neighbourhood. We came by train in order to avoid the dust, but to-night, when the heat is

over, we shall take the brake back to Paris, to dine or sup, as you please. There is a good restaurant at Bougival. If you like we will have a fine feast there, and afterwards we will have a dance at the boatmen's ball. If you prefer dining in the Bois de Boulogne, at the Cascade, for instance, say so. I don't care which we do."

While the Grasshopper was indulging in this little speech with the utmost volubility Souscarrière and Rangouze were on thorns. Neither of them had the slightest wish to accept the invitation. Rangouze even regretted getting out of the carriage, and looked sadly after the train, which was going on towards Châton. But he thought that he should settle the matter by dropping the colonel, and said to himself:

"If he accepts, I shall refuse; if he refuses, I shall accept, and get rid of Antonia and her Brazilian afterwards."

On the other hand, Souscarrière, meantime, was saying to himself: "I shall do whatever this rascal does, for I have resolved not to leave him. Wherever he goes, I follow."

He had renounced the idea of collaring Rangouze on the spot. To call the gendarmes in the presence of the prima-donna of the Fantaisies Comiques would have been like shouting the story of M. de Maugars' son-in-law from every roof in Paris. The Grasshopper would certainly have related the "scene of the Rueil Station" to everybody she saw. And such a scene would have naturally led to explanations which would have made Antonia and Don Manoël acquainted with the facts, for Rangouze was not a man to allow himself to be taken without opposition.

And it might be doubted whether the gendarmes would arrest him on the mere complaint of an ex-colonel who had been placed on the retired list by the Minister of War. Souscarrière, at this reflection, began to see that his plan was faulty from the beginning, and to understand that it would be more practical to send a clear telegram to the prefecture of police which had orders to arrest "the accused Rascaillon, called Rangouze." To do this, it would be sufficient to dog the rascal's footsteps.

"I shall find a telegraph office somewhere," he thought, "and if I made a scandalous scene here Antonia would take me for a detective, and I might miss my aim."

"Come, gentlemen," resumed the Grasshopper, "you go with us, don't you?"

"I hope so," insisted Don Manoël.

"I am very thankful for your kindness," replied Rangouze, "but I am expected elsewhere."

"Who expects you? Some fashionable lady, I suppose?"

"Perhaps so," muttered Rangouze, who wished to curtail all questions.

"And you have an appointment with her to eat fried gudgeons? That is too much! Rangouze, my dear friend, you shall tell me the name of your princess, or I shall think that you are bragging, and, so as to find out whether you are telling the truth or not, we shall follow you till we see you go somewhere, to some villa, for instance."

Rangouze put on his spectacles to cover his confusion. He did not know what to do. On the right stood the colonel, on the left the Brazilian. He was between two fires. However, Souscarrière drew him on one side and said:

"My dear sir, you will perhaps think that I am meddling with what does not concern me, but I think that I ought to say to you that, if I were in your place, I should do all I could to escape from the annoying curiosity

of this girl, who is quite capable of following you. If she found out where you went Madame Aubijoux would run the risk of being seriously compromised. It would be better, I should say, to accept Don Manoël's invitation."

"But," stammered Rangouze, "I——"

"You will recover your freedom of action in an hour or two. Antonia spoke of a boating excursion near La Grenouillère. While she is boating or bathing we can remain on shore without being watched by them; then you can go off, and I will apologise for your absence when the pair return."

"I believe that you are right," replied Rangouze.

"Come now!" exclaimed Antonia, "haven't you done talking, you two? Here is a porter coming to tell us to leave the station. Everybody has gone, and the brake is waiting for us down there." She sung her concluding words to the air of "The Tramway rushing by," and drawing Souscarrière aside, she added: "Do be obliging, colonel! If you desert me, I shall have a stupid time of it. My Brazilian is a fine fellow, but he has no liveliness about him, and he doesn't talk of anything but the *parolis* which he won at Rio Janeiro. I don't care much for Rangouze, who is as ugly as a caterpillar, now that he has dressed himself like a sexton. But I very much want you to come with us. Come, if only out of charity. You will be rewarded, for I have plenty to tell you that will interest you."

This promise would have sufficed to decide Souscarrière to accept, for he wished to know who had introduced Prunevaux to the singer, and the information given him by Rangouze did not suffice. Rangouze had not been able to remember the names of all the guests at the famous dinner at which the notary had become acquainted with the Grasshopper.

"I shall not resist any longer," said the old soldier, "and Monsieur de Rangouze will not refuse your kind invitation either, for he knows that if he refused I could not accept. I shall remain with him."

"No, no," said the rascal, "I don't refuse, but I cannot promise to remain all the evening."

"You shall do as you please," said the Brazilian, "and I shall be greatly obliged to you for whatever time you can bestow upon us. Besides——"

"My dear friend," interrupted Antonia, "you talk remarkably well, but if we pass our time in exchanging compliments, we shall never end, and I am sure that the colonel does not stand on ceremony. Give me your arm and let us all be off."

Souscarrière and Rangouze followed, and when they came to the exit the colonel let his companion pass on, as a prudent measure. He was afraid that he might slip away if he remained behind him.

"Your tickets, gentlemen!" said the gate-keeper, and he added, after looking at the little blue slips: "You are not at Saint-Germain, or at Vésinet; you are at Rueil."

"Well, what if we are," replied the colonel, "whoever can do more can do less. We have paid more than the fare, and if we choose to alight here, that is our affair."

The gatekeeper said no more, but let them pass on.

"You were going to Saint-Germain, it seems," said Souscarrière to Rangouze, who was walking ahead of him.

"And you were going to Vésinet, it appears," replied Rangouze.

"Yes, but as you know, I have a whim to take a bath instead."

"I thought that you were going to dine at the officers' mess at Saint-Germain."

"I was invited to do so; but I had another invitation to a friend's house at Vésinet, and I got into the train without making up my mind what I should do. I took my ticket to Vésinet, and could have obtained another one if I had decided to go on; and I had almost done so when the sight of the river tempted me. I went as my fancy led me. I recommend to you to do the same, but I need not, for you do so already, as you changed your mind as well."

"I did not stop here merely from caprice," replied Rangouze, who had found time to invent an excuse for his behaviour. "I am expected at Saint-Germain, and I must make a confession which will not vex you, I hope. When I knew that you were going there I thought that the lady might come to meet me at the station, and that she would not like to find you there, as you know her."

"Why did you not tell me that? I should have decided on Vésinet, at once," exclaimed Souscarrière, in order to make Rangouze believe that he credited his falsehoods.

"I did not like to do so. I was afraid of upsetting your plans."

"So that, on my account, you leave a charming woman to wait like a stork on one leg! Well, that does exceed anything I ever heard of before! I don't know how to apologise for such a thing."

"Oh! there's no great harm done. I know where to find her again, and when I alighted here I made up my mind to take a vehicle to Saint-Germain by way of Bougival. That is what I shall do, as soon as I can decently get rid of this over-civil Brazilian. Now that I have missed my appointment, it matters little whether I arrive sooner or later."

"That is true, and as you are not at variance with me about it, I shall be delighted to dine with you. If you hadn't come, I should have let Antonia and the noble foreigner go on. We ought to be two to hold out against that couple. But don't be afraid; after dinner, I'll arrange for you to get off."

"Come, come!" called out the Grasshopper, who was becoming impatient.

She had reached the end of a steep path, leading from the station to the road, long before the two companions whom she had added to her party, and was beckoning and calling to them, while Don Manoël was talking to the driver of the brake, which he had hired in Paris to carry his lady-love through the delightful district watered by the Seine.

The brake was very handsome, and the horses by no means bad, considering that the turn-out was a hired one. Antonia did not care to use her own carriage for the purpose, and the Brazilian, who had been but three months in Paris, had not yet set up an establishment. Nothing proved that he had any intention of doing so, for he occupied a very elegant suite of furnished rooms looking out on the Champs-Élysées, and had made arrangements at a livery-stable for his carriage, day or night. However, the Grasshopper hoped to persuade him that a foreigner who has any self-respect ought to have his own furniture, vehicles, and horses. She believed, this merry Grasshopper, that she could accomplish whatever she took it in her head to do, for she fancied that Rio-Tinto's diamond mine—of which he had spoken to her—was inexhaustible.

"Here we are," said Souscarrière. "We are somewhat tardy, for Monsieur Rangouze is heavily laden."

"The fact is, my dear friend, that you look as though you were going to the North Pole," exclaimed the lady. "What in the world do you want with all those wraps?"

"I am very easily chilled," replied Rangouze, who greatly regretted not having gone on to Saint-Germain.

The colonel's amiable remarks only partly quieted his apprehensions, and although he put a good face on a bad business, he intended to make off as soon as he could.

"Gentlemen," said Don Manoël, "the brake is waiting for you."

"Very well," said Souscarrière, "but where are we going?"

"To La Grenouillère first of all," said the Grasshopper.

"But that is down there on the island, if I am not mistaken, and you don't expect, I suppose, to reach it in a carriage."

"True; I had not thought of that."

"Do you care very much about visiting that aquatic establishment?"

"What do you think about it, my dear Manoël?"

"I shall do as you like. But I have heard that the crowd is very mixed there."

"Suppose we go to dinner, at Bougival," suggested Souscarrière, who was thinking that he would there find a telegraph office, and policemen, and all that was necessary to stop a thief.

"I thought that you wanted to bathe," said Rangouze, who founded every hope of escape upon that bath which the colonel had suggested, having resolved, on his own part, not to bathe, but to run off while his persecutor was in the water. To get away was his sole chance, and it seemed easy enough, for his companions could not detain him by force; but he was beginning to think that Bautru's uncle had shown strange persistence in keeping near him, and that he changed his mind with surprising ease.

"Yes, so I do," replied Souscarrière, "but I am as hungry as a hawk."

"Then I vote for the Bougival dinner," said Antonia. "Let us eat first, and make our plans afterwards. I don't like pleasure-parties that are all settled beforehand. There's nothing amusing but the unforeseen. To start for Châton and find one's self at Trouville, that's what I call fun."

"So do I," replied Souscarrière, "and the proof is that I started to-day to go to Saint-Germain."

"Ah, how like we are colonel! but Manoël understands me, too, and if I took it into my head to go to the Cirque to see 'Oceana,' I am sure that he would take me with pleasure."

"Not a doubt of that, my charmer!" replied the Brazilian; "let us get into the carriage. This is a bad place to talk."

Antonia, light as a bird, sprang into the carriage, displaying an arched instep, and a true Bordelese foot, delicately joining a slender ankle. Souscarrière seated himself beside her without losing sight of the scamp whom he was watching, and Rangouze, urged on by Don Manoël, who politely insisted upon being the last to get in, seated himself, much against his will, in front of the Grasshopper.

"Drive to Bougival, to the quay, to the restaurant with a balcony in front."

At this order, given in the clear voice which had sung the airs of "Zairette" at too high a pitch, the coachman set off along the dusty road. It was very warm, and the first part of the ride was disagreeable. On the left there was a yellowish-looking plain covered with blocks of masonry,

indulgently looked upon as country houses by the Parisians. On the right, the Seine sparkled in the July sun. But the road soon approached the river, the four excursionists began to feel the breeze, and Antonia resumed her usual chattering.

"Good gracious, Rangouze!" she said, "how frightful you look! What kind of an illness have you had?"

"Oh, nothing much," growled the money-lender; "headache that comes on every day after dinner, and forces me to walk a couple of hours to get rid of it."

"And as you don't care to walk any more between the Madeleine and the Bastille you made up your mind to come into the country. That is a good idea, but, in the name of all you hold most dear, take off your spectacles, my dear soul! The blue glass makes me cross my eyes."

"It is impossible, my dear girl. I have a cold in my eyes."

"I can see what you are contriving, you scamp!" thought Souscarrière.

"After dinner, you will say that you have the headache, and must walk about on the banks of the river, but I'll keep after you, never fear!"

"Then I forgive you for not taking supper with me on the night before last. You were at the theatre, however, and I'll bet anything that you hissed."

"I should have been the only one, if I had," said Rangouze, impudently.

"You story-teller! Do you think that I didn't hear the concert of hisses which that horrid crowd set up? I have had enough of singing to fools. I have given up singing, unless, indeed, Manoël gets me a good engagement at Rio Janeiro."

"You would certainly have a brilliant success," replied the Brazilian, "but I intend to remain in France for some years."

"What has become of your nephew?" now asked the Grasshopper of Souscarrière. "Is it true that he has settled down and is going to marry?"

"Oh, no! he is not going to marry; no thought of it. He is going to win his epaulettes in Algeria. That is much better than ruining himself in Paris in clubs and such places."

This reply threw cold water upon the conversation. The Brazilian thought it a hit at him, and Rangouze began to wonder whether the uncle had heard of the loan, at an extortionate interest, which his nephew had obtained through a certain Guénégaud, who was quite capable of having betrayed the truth concerning it, since he no longer managed such matters for his fellow countryman, Rascailon. Rangouze had arrived at a point at which everything frightened him.

The brake had now reached the first houses in Bougival. Antonia was looking at the boatmen who were on the river, and Souscarrière was examining every sign to find a telegraph office. Gaiety was, however, restored when the carriage stopped before the restaurant where the party proposed to dine. The Grasshopper knew the place, and undertook to order the dinner herself.

A quarter of an hour after their arrival, the four companions were seated at table upon a pretty terrace, which commanded a full view of the river and its islands. The tall poplars rose up before them, and the narrow canoes, paddled by young girls, shot by like arrows, followed by various skiffs, manned by boatmen in striped jerseys, and steered by pretty women, whose long hair waved in the breeze.

The thirsty crews of the different boats landed from time to time to refresh themselves. Beer foamed; swings creaked; and rope ladders bent

under the weight of bold boatmen who were scrambling up to accustom themselves to the art of climbing rigging.

Antonia gazed with envious eyes on all these lively proceedings; she remembered the happy days when, after a brilliant show of her skill in steering, she had gone to dance with the most select oarsmen of the crews. She would have liked to try this aristocratic amusement once more. But her "greatness chained her to the shore," as the poet said of Louis the Fourteenth. She now had to behave seriously, and, after all, it was not a punishment to be able to display herself in the company of three well-dressed men, and dazzle with her silken attire the young girls who were walking by with canvas shoes on their feet, and simple jackets on their backs. To astonish the drinkers of cheap Argenteuil wine, she had made up her mind to have champagne at dinner, and the corks of Moët's "Brut Impérial" were already flying.

Rangouze was beginning to pick up his courage, and the turn which his enforced drive had taken did not displease him, for he thought the prevailing confusion would be favourable to his plan of escape, and that at some moment or other, in the course of the evening, he would be able to avoid observation and disappear. He had no hope of making the colonel intoxicated, for he had supped with him at the Café Anglais, and knew that wine did not affect him, but he hoped to divert his attention by pretending to drink too much himself.

Souscarrière, meantime, was endeavouring to find some means of sending a telegram to the prefect of police without losing sight of the robber, and without putting him on his guard. It was not an easy matter, for the rascal must now have some suspicion, and if he saw the ex-colonel write a telegram and give it to a waiter, he would, in all probability, guess that it concerned him. He would become alarmed, and, to avoid capture, he would suddenly dart away in the midst of the repast. In that case, Souscarrière would be obliged to pursue him, and he wished to avoid making a spectacle of himself in the eyes of the boatmen. Besides, he had no desire that the morning papers should contain an account of a ridiculous scene in which he had played a part.

He was at last roused from his meditations by Antonia, who was talking at random, and mentioning the name of Prunevaux. She was saying that Prunevaux had been in love with her, but that she had cared nothing whatever about him, and had never listened to his overtures of affection. While she ran on like this, and Souscarrière hesitated to ask her, in Don Manoël's presence, for the name of the person who had introduced the notary to her, Rangouze kept on filling the colonel's glass, with no need of urging him to empty it whenever it was full, and other diners began to pour in upon the terrace.

Boaters of both sexes arrived group by group, and pounced upon the vacant chairs. The table nearest to Antonia's was soon appropriated by a party of four fresh water tars and a lady in a bathing dress; this was the crew of a boat called the "Barbillion," and they had the name of that incomparable craft upon their caps. The woman was stout and ruddy, with muscular arms, greatly developed by rowing; and the manner in which she called the waiter showed that she had been accustomed to giving orders. The men were evidently not gentlemen. They were tanned like sailors from India, and seemed outrageously thirsty; and besides their language was by no means choice. Their arrival created quite a stir on account of their free manners; and Antonia began to examine the oars-

woman. Don Manoël, on his side looked very dignified, and to the great astonishment of Souscarrière, Rangouze turned very pale.

"Why is that scamp changing colour? From being pale he has now become positively green."

Having indulged in this mental remark, the old soldier began to examine the joyous party assembled at the nearest table more attentively. The first thought that occurred to him was that the oarswoman was some former acquaintance of Rangouze's, and that he was afraid of being recognised by her; but the female tar had arrived at the head of the party, and Rangouze had not changed countenance at sight of her. He had even joked about her strange gait, which was like that of some old tar used to a ship's pitching and tossing. The men who had come in after her were all worth looking at. Every variety of boatman was represented among them—the champion, a frequent winner of races, who has saved several people from drowning, and who, in consequence, is decorated with medals; the fat man, who guides the helm for sanitary reasons and wishes to become slender; the traveller by choice, who is exploring the banks of the Seine to console himself for not being able to sail round the world; the accidental navigator, a gay fellow, who gets into a boat just as he would ride a donkey at Montmorency, to amuse himself, and who shouts all day, dances all night, and drinks like a commercial traveller.

The representative of the last species was a tall and very broad-shouldered fellow, as dark as a Catalonian, and with woolly hair like a negro; he talked very loudly, and banged his fist upon the table to summon the waiters. Before becoming so noisy, however, he had paused for a moment to look at the persons who were dining with Antonia, and had glanced quickly round the group.

"This is evidently the man who is Rangouze's Medusa," said Souscarrière to himself. "Why does he frighten him? Because he knows him? Is Rangouze afraid of being spoken to by this common-looking rowdy. I think so, for he is trying to prevent him from seeing his face."

And, indeed, the usurer, who until now had done little honour to the meal before him, suddenly began to devour the fried fish as if he were intensely hungry. He bolted the gudgeons with feverish activity, and did not raise his head or utter a sound.

However, the boatman no longer looked at him. In fact, he was otherwise engaged; for, having uncorked two bottles of Suresnes, he was pouring the wine into the glasses of his party, while waiting for the fish-stew which he had ordered on entering.

"Rangouze, my good fellow, take care!" said the Grasshopper; "you forget that little fish have bones. You will choke yourself."

At the sound of his own name Rangouze made a face which nearly brought Antonia's prophecy to realisation, for he swallowed the wrong way, and was taken with a violent fit of coughing.

His name, pronounced by an unusually sharp soprano voice, was heard by the crew of the "Barbillon," and the oarsman who was filling the glasses remained with his hand stretched out and poured about a fourth of the contents of the bottle he held over the stool on which he was sitting.

"Good!" exclaimed Antonia to Rangouze; "now you are strangling. Your physician was decidedly wrong in sending you into the country to get cured."

"I don't feel well at all, that is a fact," growled the native of Marseilles. "I am afraid that I shan't be able to stay till the dinner is over."

"That is a mere excuse for leaving us. Don't imagine that I shall let you go. I mean to go to the boatmen's ball to-night, and I have been told that you dance with remarkable grace. So I expect you to dance the first quadrille with me."

"I can't. I don't dance."

"What a story! That's a put-off, and nothing else. In the part you came from everybody dances the farandola. You shall show me the steps."

"But I assure you that——"

"Not a word more or I shall ask the colonel to invite me. He is too well bred to refuse. And if his nephew, Guy de Bautru, were here, he wouldn't be so rude as you are."

"I don't know whether he would consent to make a spectacle of himself or not, but I——"

"Yes, you are all for 'style.' Why, the boatmen's ball is the most stylish thing in the world. The most fashionable women attend it. Ask Rosine when you see her. She knows all about it, and she will tell you that at Bougival real style consists in not being obstinate."

Rangouze probably feared that his somewhat hoarse voice would be recognized at the next table, for he did not answer. However, Don Manoël, who considered himself to be extremely well bred, came to the rescue. "Antonia, my dear," he said, gently, "you are tormenting Monsieur de Rangouze. And I am sure that the colonel agrees with me that it will not be in good taste to make a show of ourselves. And besides," he added, lowering his voice, "you don't observe that people are listening to us."

Souscarrière nodded, as a sign of assent, to the Brazilian's caution, and it was soon obvious that M. de Rio-Tinto was right. The boatman with the woolly hair had allowed his companions to touch glasses with the oarswoman, while he himself listened attentively to what was being said beside him, and, thanks to the Grasshopper, who had a mania for calling out people's names, he now knew who was with her. He turned completely round, bent over without leaving his seat, and, to the horror of Antonia, who prided herself upon etiquette, he touched Rangouze upon the shoulder, and said: "Good day, master. May a storm capsize the 'Barbillion' if I expected to dine to-night side by side with you."

This was a thorough "stage effect." Don Manoël frowned, and drew himself up with a stiff air. Antonia gave the intruder a furious look for his impertinence in addressing one of her guests, and Rangouze started as though he felt a detective's hand upon his shoulder.

Souscarrière, greatly astonished and more surprised than incensed by this occurrence, turned towards the boatman to hear what he would say next.

"Tell me, master," said the familiar oarsman, "why don't you look better pleased to see me? I know what is the matter. You think that I'm not dressed well enough to be introduced to your party. Well, no matter, I'll introduce myself," and with these words the fellow rose, bowed profoundly, and resumed: "Ladies and gentlemen, I was the clerk of Monsieur Julès de Rangouze, here present, and I am his fellow-townsmen, Marius Guénégaud, from Marseilles, director of a navigation company and representative of the firm of Aubijoux & Co."

"Aubijoux!" involuntarily repeated Souscarrière.

"Yes, sir, at your service, if I can be so. And I know who I am talking to, as this lady says that you are Monsieur de Bautru's uncle."

"How is that? Do you know my nephew?"

"Oh, not much. I only know that he is a charming young man, rather bad tempered, but very generous. As for Mademoiselle Antonia, I had the pleasure of hearing her sing on the night before last at the national theatre of the *Fantaisies Comiques*. I don't know this gentleman," added Marius, looking at Don Manoël, "but I see that he is a foreigner. And now, master, I hope you will allow me to speak to you for a moment. I have something very interesting to tell you. Not right away; no, I should be sorry to disturb you. After dinner—when you have had your coffee and cognac—we will have a little chat, if you like. It won't hinder you from going to the ball with this lady, and I shall be proud to dance opposite to you. As chance has given me the pleasure of finding you once more, master, I should like to take advantage of it all the evening. Do you know that I didn't recognise you at first with your spectacles and wig? What a strange idea to rig yourself out like that!"

Rangouze attempted to reply, but the words stuck in his throat, and he uttered nothing but inarticulate sounds. The scene was a strange one, and Souscarrière, whom it greatly interested, was wondering how it would end, when an unexpected diversion took place.

At the foot of the terrace a loud trumpet-blast suddenly sounded, more noisily than harmoniously. The shouts of people on the river responded, and then a dozen crackers went off at once.

"Thunder and Mars!" exclaimed Guénégaud, "the crews from the Marne have come up! There will be something fine all along the line. We must see that!"

His comrades were already leaning over the terrace railing, and the *oursivromai* was shrieking cries of admiration, which might have been heard at Châton. Marius ran to the railing and took his share in the mad concert. But the party whom his outburst had disturbed did not follow. Antonia and Don Manoël exchanged indignant glances. Souscarrière did not know what precise connection might have existed between Guénégaud and the man whom he called "Master," but he could guess pretty well what it must have been. Aubijoux had told him enough to make him understand the matter. The rowdy boatman must have been Rangouze's middle-man in his money-lending operations, but he had seemingly left him, as he boasted of now representing M. Aubijoux. Rangouze was evidently afraid of him, so that he must be an enemy, and Souscarrière thought of trying to utilise his services in the delicate operation he had in hand.

Rangouze, for his part, felt no doubt as to the intentions of his former clerk. Guénégaud was on Aubijoux's side. Guénégaud must know all that had been going on in Paris during the past forty-eight hours. He must be aware that the police were looking for him—Rangouze, and that he was hiding from them. Guénégaud could collar him if he liked, and his remarks seemingly indicated that he proposed affording this satisfaction to the rich merchant who at present employed him; Rangouze determined to leave no device untried in view of getting out of Guénégaud's way.

"What kind of fellow is that clown who pretends to have been your clerk?" asked the Grasshopper, drily. "Did you have any clerks formerly? What kind of business did you do?"

"I operated on 'Change,'" stammered Rangouze. "That fellow is a

poor devil from my own part of the country whom I employed out of charity."

"He does not appear to be very grateful if you did, for he spoke in a way that you ought not to tolerate. I shan't allow him to take part in our conversation again. He would end by asking to join us, and I don't care to associate with that common-looking woman who is with him. I have had enough of Bougival and the boatmen. Manoël, you will oblige me by sending the waiter to tell the coachman to get ready for our return to Paris."

"Very willingly, my dear girl," replied the Brazilian. "The society here is really very low."

"And the cookery is very bad," said Souscarrière.

"Then you will go with us, colonel?" exclaimed the Grasshopper. "Well, this is what I propose doing. We shall be in Paris before nine, just the time for going to the circus. After that we can go and take some supper, to make up for our interrupted dinner. As for you, my dear sir, she added, addressing Rangouze, "you are not obliged to follow us if you prefer to take coffee with your clerk."

"I don't wish to do so," said Rangouze, "but——"

"You are perhaps afraid that this fellow—who seems to have taken too much wine—will make a scandalous scene by trying to detain you," said Souscarrière. "Shall I say a few words to him to make him behave himself?"

This proposal filled Rangouze with the utmost perplexity. He asked himself on which side the greatest danger lay. Probably much less on that of the colonel than of Guénégaud. Souscarrière seemed to have no further suspicions, if, indeed, he had ever had any. Guénégaud, on the contrary, had spoken words which seemed to cover a serious threat. He wished, he said, to have a chat after dinner, and what could he want to talk about save of the situation he had just discovered. He perhaps meant to try to blackmail his old master. The latter considered that by remaining he would place himself at Marius's mercy, for he no doubt would pursue his object with all the tenacity peculiar to drunkards. To return to Paris was less dangerous, although not without peril. Rangouze thought that with the help of the darkness he would not find it difficult to make his escape on the way. He could make some excuse for leaving the party before reaching the circus, which he did not care to enter. And the asylum where he had already concealed himself was still open to him at his friend the grocer's in the Rue d'Amsterdam.

"Come, make up your mind," said the Grasshopper. "If you are afraid of your clerk, take advantage of the colonel's kindness to bring the fellow to terms."

"I am afraid that he won't succeed," remarked Rangouze.

"I am sure that I shall," replied Souscarrière. "Shall I tell you how I will set about it? He has just said that he is at present in Monsieur Aubijoux's employ. I shall tell him that I am an intimate friend of his new employer, and he won't dare to disobey me. Let me do as I wish, my dear sir, and everything will be all right."

Rangouze did not like the means proposed, and attempted to detain Souscarrière, but the latter strode away across the terrace without listening to him.

Guénégaud and his party were leaning over the railing and addressing coarse witticisms to the boatmen of the Marne.

The colonel pulled at Marius's jacket, and after having forced him to turn round, exclaimed "Two words, I beg, from Monsieur Aubijoux."

Rangouze, who saw the conversation begin from afar, now asked himself whether he could not profit by this chance to escape while the two men whom he feared were earnestly talking together at some distance from the table.

"I am at your orders, colonel," replied Guénégaud, eagerly. "I was shutting up the mouths of those ragamuffins from the Marne, but if you have anything to say to me from Monsieur Aubijoux I shall leave everything else. Monsieur Aubijoux, you see, is my providence. But I was not aware that you knew him."

"I flatter myself that I am his friend," replied Souscarrière, "and it is in his name that I address you. What I have to say won't take long, but I don't wish to lose sight of the persons who dined with me. Be good enough to face them. Turn round so as to lean your back against the railing."

This was not a useless precaution on the old soldier's part, for Rangouze seemed to wish to escape. He began to look extremely restless while he talked to Antonia, who seemed to be trying to detain him, but he became quiet again as soon as he saw that the colonel's piercing eyes were fixed upon him.

"If I go off he will come after me," thought the wretched Rangouze. "It will be better to let him do as he wishes. He will, perhaps, rid me of that rascally Guénégaud, and after that, when I get back to Paris, I'll find some way of making off without mincing the matter."

While the usurer was pondering in this fashion, Souscarrière had come to the question in hand. "Did Monsieur Aubijoux speak to you of his troubles with that fellow?" he asked, nodding so as to indicate Rangouze.

"Yes; but he did not tell me much," replied Marius; "he told me that he suspected him of having done some very bad things in the past."

"Yes, when he was working with a merchant at Marseilles."

"Correct! I see that I can speak out. Monsieur Aubijoux told me all that, ten days ago. He made my acquaintance in an odd way, but it would require too long to tell you about it now. It was only on the day before yesterday that I knew his real name. He came to bring me my appointment to a good situation and a note for a thousand francs, which I am drinking up with my friends here, and he told me that my former employer was a thorough scoundrel, and that he was going to have him arrested for what he had done, and for having caused a man named Vallouris to be accused of it. I did not ask any further questions."

"But you were greatly surprised to see Monsieur de Rangouze here with blue spectacles on, a blonde wig, and his beard shaved off?"

"I was completely *flattened*, colonel, and I at once said to myself that he was probably going to bolt and would not come back again. However, as he was with you, I had my doubts. I wished to know what was up, and I meant to say two words to him after dinner."

"There's no need for that, my good fellow, as I have charge of him. I caught him in a railway carriage, and I shall give an account of him to Monsieur Aubijoux. Will you help me to deliver him over to the police?"

Guénégaud reflected for a moment, and then replied, "I don't refuse, colonel, for the man is a scamp; but, you see, I was in his employ, and if I collared him myself he might say hard things to me."

"So you were his agent in those usurious affairs of his?"

"What could I do? I was starving when he proposed to me to take part in his underhand dealings. I accepted, so as to earn my living; but I am not a bad man, and the proof of it is that Monsieur Aubijoux has taken me——"

"Yes, yes, I know, and I don't ask you to take Rangouze by the collar."

"I couldn't do it here. The boatmen don't like the police. We should have both Seine and Marne against us."

"That isn't my way of acting. Listen to me. The fellow let himself be brought to Bougival because he couldn't help it. He is not quite sure that I wish to arrest him, but he mistrusts me, and he is only waiting for a chance to get off. Look at him now."

"That's true. He is turning his head, and seems hardly able to keep still."

"He won't go, however. I have my eye upon him, and he is afraid of you. He thinks that you may have been put upon his track by Monsieur Aubijoux. I told him that I meant to ask you, in Monsieur Aubijoux's name, to stop annoying him, and he about half believes me. I pretended to be shocked by your speaking to us in the middle of our dinner. Now this is what I want you to do. I shall go back to tell him that you have agreed not to torment him while we are here, but that, if we leave him where you can approach him alone you will begin again; that you appear to have something against him which I cannot find out. I wish to make him give up all idea of staying here, and induce him to go on to Paris with us. The lady and the foreigner have had enough of this restaurant, which is much too noisy. Rangouze is afraid of you, but he won't be afraid of me, now that I seem to be taking his part. He will consent to go with us."

"That is likely enough, but what then? What can I do to serve you?"

"You know Monsieur Aubijoux's address?"

"Perfectly well—the Boulevard Montmorency, No.—"

"Very well. As soon as you see us start off in our brake, go straight to the telegraph office and send a telegram to Monsieur Aubijoux, to say, from me, you understand, that in an hour and a half Monsieur Jules de Rangouze will arrive in an open vehicle at the Porte-Maillot. Aubijoux will know what he has to do. He will apprise the police. Detectives will be sent on. The rascal will be arrested at the city gate, and I will promise to have you suitably rewarded by Monsieur Aubijoux for the service you will have rendered him. You understand? Can I rely upon you?"

"Absolutely, colonel. I will go at once to the office——"

"No. Wait until we start. If Rangouze saw you leave here now, he might suspect something, and in five minutes we shall start. Do as I tell you, and come to see me to-morrow at the Grand Hôtel. You won't regret it."

Souscarrière closed the interview with a gesture of command. Rangouze, who was looking on saw this gesture, which was intended to make him believe that the colonel had been reproving the too familiar boatman.

"I would go through fire itself, colonel, for you and Monsieur Aubijoux. Whatever happens, Monsieur Aubijoux shall have your message in an hour, even if I am obliged to take it to him on horseback," said Marius. "I will talk a little bit more to those chaps from the Marne, until you start, you know, and after that I shan't lose a second."

Souscarrière returned to the table where he was impatiently awaited. Rangouze was as uneasy as though the seat of his chair had been stuffed with thorns. Antonia was putting on her "moss-nest" hat, and Don Manoël was paying the bill.

"Come, colonel, come!" called out the Grasshopper; "the brake is ready, and I wouldn't stay five minutes longer in this tavern for all the gold in the world! The noise would set me crazy."

"Excuse me, my dear lady. I have brought Monsieur de Rangouze's old clerk to reason, but in doing so I had some trouble. The wine has flown to his head, and he has some grudge or other against our friend. I don't know what it is, but I used Monsieur Aubijoux's name to sermonise him pretty sharply. Indeed, I told him that either to-night or to-morrow Monsieur de Rangouze and I would see Monsieur Aubijoux and tell him how his new clerk had been carrying on. This threat quieted him, and he promised to keep quiet. But, all the same, he has a fierce grudge against our friend here."

"Then, my dear Rangouze, you had much better come with us."

"I intend to do so," answered the native of Marseilles, by no means reassured as to the intentions of Marius Guénégaud. "It isn't because I am afraid of the fellow, but because he disgusts me."

"Let us go, then," said the Grasshopper, turning towards the steps.

No one noticed the early departure of the party, who left without eating any dessert. The waiters had been largely fed, and all the boatmen were occupied in shouting at one another. Guénégaud had gone back to his own party.

Souscarrière kept close to Rangouze, and had the satisfaction of being able to help him into the vehicle which was to place him within reach of the police. The coachman had the tact not to bring his horses up to the main entrance of the restaurant. He waited further off, and the party drove away without passing through the crowd below the terrace.

The carriage drove swiftly along by way of Rueil and Courbevoie, and then, crossing the Seine, turned into the Avenue de Neuilly. Don Manoël had very quietly submitted to the sudden change in Antonia's plans. It mattered very little to him where he went, so long as she accompanied him, for he was very much smitten with the Grasshopper, who sung so badly but was so attractive, especially to a foreigner. Antonia was delighted at an opportunity for making merry at the expense of Rangouze, whom she had made up her mind to torment all the evening.

Souscarrière, on his side, was beginning to fear that his plan might fail, for the telegram might not reach M. Aubijoux in time. He had no doubt as to the good will of Guénégaud, who had every interest in serving Aubijoux, but if the millionaire of the Boulevard Montmorency happened to be away from home, or even if he was there, would there be time to let a police officer know what was to be done, and for him to reach the city gate with his men before the brake drove up? The electric spark darts round the world in a few seconds, but messenger boys cannot run at full speed to carry telegrams to people's houses, or are telegraph offices open at all hours.

As they drove through Rueil, Souscarrière noticed that the telegraph office there was closed, and he thought it might be the same at Bougival. Was there any office at Bougival? Guénégaud had not said anything to the contrary, as he had undertaken the matter, but he might be wrong. Souscarrière did not conceal from himself that if there was none

his plan must fail. He had made it hastily, without time to examine its weak points, and he could not change it now, but must proceed as he had begun.

"If this money-lender's clerk is wide-awake," thought he, "we might do without the telegram. He could hire a horse and gallop to the Boulevard Montmorency. That would be the surest course; for if Aubijoux was away the clerk could go on to the prefecture. The question is, could a hired horse go as fast as the carriage? We are driving very fast, and Guénégaud may be a very poor rider. Being a bargeman from Marseilles, he can't know much about horses. Well! I must decidedly resort to heroic measures. If I don't find the police at Porte-Maillot, I will do the work myself. Rangouze certainly does not intend to go to the circus to see Madame Océana performing. He will ask to get out when we reach the Champs Elysées or near there. I shall follow him, collar him, and take him to the station-house. Thunder and lightning! if Estelan knew what I am doing for his sake, I think that he would be surprised! My nephew will thank me, later on, for having put an end to all our anxieties. The sooner Madeleine's husband is free, the sooner we shall know what to do."

While Souscarrière was thus reasoning with himself, so as to quiet the scruples which arose in his mind from time to time, the brake went on with annoying rapidity. It passed the last houses of Rueil, and ascended the gentle slope at the foot of Mont Valérien. The sun had disappeared behind the hills of Marly, and night drew near, although it was a long summer day. Bantru's uncle looked up at the telegraph wires, and anxiously wondered whether the telegram was flying along at that moment. He thought that the carriage progressed unreasonably fast.

"Do you know," said he to the driver, "that you ought not to be so hard on your horses? Let them take it easy up this hill."

The driver was glad to do so, and held in his horses; but the change did not suit the Grasshopper, who exclaimed: "How is it, colonel, that you, who have been a cavalry officer, like to go so slowly? I don't care to drive unless I drive fast. A swift trot in the Paris streets and a tearing speed in the country, that is what suits me."

"That is precisely what makes me spare horses, my having been in a cavalry regiment," replied Souscarrière. "Besides, I don't see what we need be in such a tearing hurry about."

"But I do. I don't want to miss the circus. It is eight o'clock already."

"Oh! we have time enough," said Don Manoël. "Océana does not appear till the end. It isn't stylish to go early."

"I set the fashion, if you please, my lord. I don't need to follow it. If I chose to hire a box by the year at the Grenelle Theatre, low as it is, the 'swells' would fill it every evening."

"I don't doubt that," laughed Souscarrière, "but don't be impatient, my dear. We shall be at Courbevoie in a quarter of an hour, and from there we only have to go through Neuilly; but, for my part, I should be glad if Paris were ten leagues further away, to have the pleasure of remaining longer in your society."

"That is well said; you are becoming quite gallant again," replied the Grasshopper, mincingly. "You know very well, however, that we are not going to part so soon. The circus and supper, that is the programme; we shall keep you till three in the morning."

"I should be very willing, but I cannot stay."

"What! are you thinking of leaving us?"

"I must do so. Just remember that I left Paris intending to go to Saint-Germain, and that I allowed myself to be taken to Bougival. If you had remained at the boatmen's ball, I should have asked permission to return to Paris, where my nephew expects me at eleven o'clock."

As Souscarrière spoke, he looked at Rangouze and saw that the usurer's features evinced the liveliest satisfaction at the prospect of getting rid of him. "That was well said!" thought Souscarrière. "Now that he imagines that I intend to leave him, he will not try to escape."

"You do very wrong to leave as like that," resumed Antonia. "I thought that I should have such a pleasant evening with lively company. Fortunately, Rangouze remains," she added, with an ironical grimace.

"I cannot promise that, to my regret," said the man from Marseilles, who wished to preserve his liberty of action. "How could I show myself at the theatre looking as I do?"

"You look beautiful, my dear sir, and you would make a hit. Our friends will take you for Don Manoël's business man, and if any one recognises you, it will be thought that you are in travelling dress, so as to be ready to carry off some circus rider when the performance is over."

"You always joke, my dear Antonia, but——"

"Coachman," called out Souscarrière, "your horse's shoe is loose on the off side, front."

"You saw it before I did, sir," replied the driver, with the deference which such people always show to those who are fond of horses and understand them.

"If you keep on he will fall lame. You must stop at the first farrier's we come across."

"There is one at Courbevoie, and here we are."

"With all these stoppings we shall end by coming to a standstill," said the Grasshopper. But she talked in vain. Don Manoël agreed with the colonel, and the shoeing of the horse was done, and took some time.

Antonia was vexed, but Souscarrière was delighted. The delay made him hope that the police would be at the city gate before the carriage arrived, and that he would not be forced to do their business for them. As for Rangouze, he was not at all sorry to reach town after dark, and he felt more and more secure. Souscarrière had alighted to watch the shoeing, and help the farrier, if necessary, but he did not lose sight of the usurer, who remained behind in the carriage. As the old soldier alighted, a horse going at full speed came from the direction of Bougival, and he stepped forward to look at it, for something told him that this furious gallop related to his great affair, and his presentiment proved true.

The horse, which passed by ten paces from him, was mounted by a strangely attired rider. Linen trousers stuffed into his boots, a boating jacket and cap—such were the distinguishing features of his dress. He was impetuous, but he did not ride well, for with the hand which held the reins, he also clutched the saddle. However, with his other hand he brandished a whip, with which he lashed his steed, while he goaded its sides with the long spurs affixed to his boots. He passed by so quickly that he did not attract the attention of Rangouze, for it was already night-fall, and Antonia and the Brazilian did not remark him either, but Souscarrière recognised him perfectly. It was Marius Guénégaud who was thus rushing towards Paris at the risk of breaking his neck.

"I guessed right," thought the colonel. "There is no telegraph-office at Bougival, or if there is one it is shut, and my brave bargeman has not

hesitated to carry his message himself. That is a brave act, and I shall reward him, for he deserves it. He is intelligent and determined, for he has never been on horseback before, that's clear; he holds on to the horse like a monkey riding a spaniel. Where is he going? He must have thought that Aubijoux might not be at home, and is going direct to the prefecture of police. He will mention my name there; the commissary who sends out the detectives will recognise it, and he will send some men to the city gate. Now, the only thing is not to get there too soon, and that is just what I fear will happen. Supposing the bargeman does not fall off on the way, it will take him at least an hour to reach the prefecture, and supposing that the commissary is at his post, he will require another hour to get his men together and station them at the Porte-Maillot. Unfortunately, however, we shall be there in three-quarters of an hour, if I don't find some means of causing a delay."

Everything depended, in fact, upon the time which the carriage would take in covering the distance from Courbevoie to the fortifications of Paris.

Souscarrière did all that he could to delay the departure, declaring that the horse was badly shod, and starting a discussion with the farrier, who contradicted him, and was right in doing so. However, the colonel forced him to take out one nail and put in another. He succeeded in this way in occupying a quarter of an hour, but, at last, having no further excuse, he was obliged to get into the carriage and give the signal for departure.

Antonia was beginning to think that the old soldier had very inconvenient fancies, and, to make up for lost time, she promised the coachman twenty francs if he would go ahead fast. As the road sloped down rapidly towards the Seine, the horses were soon trotting at a rapid pace.

"What's that? an illumination?" suddenly exclaimed the Grasshopper. "Have they lighted the lamps to welcome our return?"

On the opposite side of the river a number of Venetian lanterns of many colours could be seen, and strains of music were wafted along by the breeze.

"Wait!" said Souscarrière; "it seems to me that I read somewhere that this is the Neuilly fair."

"Oh, yes! the Fête de Neuilly is charming, and quite the fashion; all my friends will be there! Shall we stop, too, and see the fair?"

"What!" said Rio-Tinto, "do you want to do that?"

"Why not?"

"But I'm sure that there will be an immense crush, and a worse one than at Bougival."

"I don't care. I'm not proud. And I'm devoted to merry-go-rounds, Russian mountains, and Dutch tops. Zélie bet on one last week and won two china vases. I want to see if I shall be as lucky as she was. Will you come, colonel?"

"I've no objection. Nothing amuses me more than strolling about and seeing the parade in front of the show booths."

"Good! bravo! What do you say, Kangouze?"

"I shouldn't be sorry to see the 'Italian Venus.' Girac saw her, and told me that she was superb."

"*Bravissimo!* We are all agreed, then. You were all vexed when I proposed the circus, but never mind, as you all agree about the fair. Now I shall have a pleasant evening."

"I don't promise to stay all night," said Souscarrière, "but I can stay a couple of hours."

"So can I," said Rangouze.

"That is all I ask ; we will get out of the carriage at the bridge, walk up the avenue on foot, and stop before all the booths. The brake will follow us to the Porte-Maillot at a walk. When we get there, gentlemen, you shall be free. If you make up your mind to leave us, Monsieur de Rio-Tinto and I will take supper by ourselves."

This arrangement suited everybody. Rangouze relied upon making his escape amid the jostling crowd which always surrounds the booths ; in fact, a hundred chances might arise in a walk through a fair. He relied, too, on the strolling propensities of which the colonel had boasted, and proposed to escape from him while he was staring at the Young Alsatian choosing in favour of French Nationality, or the Sirens depicted upon the back canvas walls of the booths.

Souscarrière was very glad that chance had thus favoured him. The means he had been worrying about had come of themselves. Nothing would be easier than to spend a couple of hours in seeing all the sights of the fair, and the visit would necessarily end at the Porte-Maillot, where the police would be waiting for the "accused Rascaillon, otherwise Rangouze."

"He will try to give me the slip," thought the colonel, "but I defy him to succeed, for I shall keep close to him."

Souscarrière, who had hesitated about collaring the man whose arrest would give Estelan his liberty, had ended by taking a great interest in his capture, for he no longer thought of Estelan or Guy, or Margars, or Madeleine. His one idea was to have a scoundrel arrested. And, although he had not read many novels relating to criminals and their capture, he understood the pleasure which detectives take in struggling against a malefactor who ably defends himself. Souscarrière was a good huntsman, and he now felt as though he were running down a wolf.

"Five minutes to nine," said he, taking out his watch just as the brake passed over the bridge of Neuilly. "I have time to see everything without making my nephew wait."

"We have come too soon," replied Antonia ; "people who respect themselves don't come here till between ten and eleven. We shan't meet anybody of your acquaintance, and my friends won't be here, either. But, after all, we did not come here to put on style, and I am just as well pleased to find plain people only. It will be ever so much funnier. Tell the coachman to stop, colonel. The fair extends all the way from the bridge to the city gate, and I want to see everything that is to be seen."

The brake drew up against the wide side-walk in front of a dazzling establishment for the sale of that important article, gingerbread. The four travellers alighted. M. de Rio-Tinto gave his orders to the coachman, and offered his arm to the Grasshopper. Meantime Souscarrière appropriated the arm of Rangouze, saying, with a good-natured air :

"Will you allow me, sir, to lean on you while our voyage of discovery lasts ? Never having served in the infantry, I am a very bad walker."

Antonia's party was about to walk up the avenue and begin inspecting the curiosities, when a policeman approached Don Manoël and informed him that his carriage could not go straight to the Porte-Maillot, or even station itself at the end of the Neuilly bridge. The crowd was such that, to prevent accidents, the authorities had decided upon abandoning the thoroughfare to pedestrians.

"You have only to turn to the left on the quay, take the Avenue des

Ternes, and then the Route de la Révolte," cried Antonia to the coachman. "You can wait for us outside the city gate,* in front of the restaurant there."

This new arrangement did not disturb Souscarrière, who was fully determined not to leave Rangouze, or drop his arm till they entered the carriage. Provided they did this before passing through the gate where the police were on the watch, everything would happen precisely as the colonel anticipated.

As Rangouze had no suspicion whatever of the surprise which awaited him at the fortifications, he thought very little about the carriage, which he did not propose entering again. The necessity of giving his arm to the colonel troubled him far more than the departure of the brake. He mentally sent the old "trooper," as he affectionately called the colonel, to the devil, and did not believe that he had any difficulty in walking at all; however, he said to himself that a time would come when, on some pretext or other, he would shake the old fool off.

Music could now be heard on every side. The organs accompanying the whirling merry-go-rounds screeched and whined, while innumerable cymbals and trombones sounded on the platforms of show booths filled with red-coated musicians. There was a deafening noise; but Souscarrière and Rangouze had nothing to say for the moment, and Antonia, who undoubtedly had some confidential remark to make to Don Manoël, walked with her head leaning towards that gentleman's shoulder and whispered in his ear. However, no one took offence at this affectionate attitude, as the people who go to the Neuilly fairs are not at all particular as to propriety.

The Grasshopper was delighted. The noise and stir increased her spirits. She laughed in the face of the quiet citizens who had lost their wives or daughters, in the midst of the motley crowd. She vowed to herself that she would win a rabbit and a reed-pipe at some raffle. She was reminded of her girlhood. She imagined that she was once more at Bordeaux, at the fair held on the Quinconces during the vintage season.

The Brazilian, less enthusiastic as to popular rejoicings, was somewhat astonished at finding himself there; but he had already caught sight of some stylish damsels, escorted by clubmen whom he knew by sight, and he concluded that the Neuilly fair was a part of the amusements of fashionable life in Paris.

Antonia did not let him off from "inspecting" every booth and shanty. She bargained for gingerbread and Rouen apple-candy; she went into ecstasies over the painted signs on which "electric" or "torpedo" women touched gentlemen with the tips of their fingers and made them turn a somersault; over those on which female giants were depicted in colossal proportions; and all the similar "attractions" blazing in gaudy colours, excited her curiosity.

Souscarrière followed close behind her, still holding on to Rangouze, and apparently taking the liveliest pleasure in this promenade, which was brought to a stand-still every moment by the crowd.

Vainly did Rangouze mutter: "These 'curiosities' are not at all curious."

"They amuse me very much, indeed," replied Souscarrière, with the utmost coolness. With his military eye he had now measured the distance which separated the bridge from the city gate, saying to himself:

"With a dozen stoppages we have two hours before us at least. The detectives will be at their post long before we get there."

Antonia had not yet expressed any wish to take part in a game or go into a booth. She had scorned to climb into the "American railway train," and she had turned aside from the mechanically worked velocipedes. But she could not resist the attractions of a display of cheap china, Ruolz forks and spoons, and candlesticks in imitation bronze. All these cheap products of industrial art could be obtained by taking tickets, as at a lottery, and the Grasshopper, who had rare works of art at home which had cost five hundred napoleons apiece, was seized with the desire to win a complete service in pipe-clay, worth twelve francs.

She began the game with unparalleled ardour. Don Manoël, Sous-carrière and Rangouze were required to do the same, and chance favoured them all. It must be said that the Grasshopper took almost all the tickets, and could scarcely fail to have a good one at each drawing. After twenty minutes of this exercise, the Brazilian had disbursed seventy-nine francs, and Antonia was the owner of two vases in gilt china, a big zinc ball which reflected everything around, and two bouquet-holders in coloured glass.

It now became necessary to carry away these spoils, and she had recourse to her three *cavalieri-serventi*. Don Manoël made a face when he saw that she wished him to carry the zinc ball; but Souscarrière laughingly seized the two bouquet-holders, and Rangouze was obliged to take the pair of vases.

Souscarrière had not let go of the usurer's arm without good reason. He had a diabolical thought. He said to himself that if Rangouze were thus laden he could no longer fly. The vases he carried would be much more difficult to get rid of than his—Souscarrière's—arm. A man may drop the arm of a companion and mingle with the crowd in an instant; but pottery can't be dropped in the same way, for the smash would at once draw a crowd.

The two vases were enormous, and the unfortunate usurer, who had one under each arm, made a most piteous appearance. Antonia almost died of laughing. "This is too much!" she cried. "Three men belonging to the best society in Paris, and one of them from another world, as it were, and all of them carrying my parcels! Colonel, it was you who set them the example. You are charming, and I idolise you. And I love you too, Rangouze, although you do look like an errand-boy disguised as a sexton's assistant."

"You are extremely witty," grumbled the money-lender, "but I presume that you don't intend to make me carry these hideous pitchers all night."

"Only as far as the city gate, my dear friend. And yet you complain! Look at Monsieur Souscarrière! Does he murmur? And yet he has been a colonel."

"And will carry anything you like, and as long as you like, my dear girl," replied Souscarrière.

"And so would Don Manoël, I'll venture to say," said Antonia with a domineering look. "And now, gentlemen," she added, "let us go on, if you please. We have not yet gone a third of the way, and have lots of things to see. Zélie told me about a wrestling booth. She says there is a man named Crombard there, called 'The Rampart of Carcassonne,' who is simply stunning. Rangouze can rest himself while this fellow throws down all the other wrestlers. Meantime, come here between the colonel and me. I am afraid that you will break my vases. We will stand on each side of you and keep everybody off. Now you are well guarded."

"Much too well," thought the unlucky money lender, who was as much a captive as though he had been between two policemen. He had now but one hope, and this was to get rid of the pottery when they reached the wrestling booth.

Souscarrière was triumphant. Everything went well. The rascal whom he guarded could not escape, and he rejoiced to see him with his arms rounded like the handles of a pitcher, his head hanging, and his eyes fixed on the bag which knocked against his stomach at every step, the famous bag containing his ill-gotten gold and bank-notes.

"In an hour I shall be rid of him," thought Souscarrière. "To-morrow, Estelan will be released, and the great battle will begin—the struggle for 'the survival of the fittest,' as the Englishman who maintains that we all descended from monkeys said."

Meantime, the party progressed, but not rapidly. Antonia stopped before every sign that presented any temptation whatever. She amused herself by questioning the female soothsayers, who, perched upon platforms, offered to tell the fortunes of the people around them by speaking through a tin tube applied to the questioner's ear. She allowed a learned individual to tell her what kind of constitution she had, by making her hold a glass tube filled with some mysterious crimson liquid. She, in fact, made so many stoppages that it took a full hour to reach the tent in front of which the "Ramparts" of different cities were striking attitudes and defying amateurs.

Rangouze, still encumbered with the vases, was inwardly raging, although now near the termination of his trials, and he thought that he had better remind the Grasshopper that she wished to see the handsome wrestler whom Zélie had mentioned. Souscarrière, less cramped in his movements, had contrived to look at his watch from time to time, and saw that it was now about ten o'clock. The wrestling booth was some two hundred paces from the Porte-Maillot. A match would last from thirty to forty minutes. And afterwards the decisive moment would come.

The wrestlers were already parading up and down a long platform before a small number of spectators. It was the second performance of the evening, and less tiresome than many a better thing. There were some admirers of wrestling left, and several hands were raised to receive the knotted handkerchiefs which a fat man with red breeches and a soiled guernsey threw into the crowd from time to time. It is thus, as is well known, that athletes throw down the gauntlet, and those who pick up the handkerchief show by that bold act that they accept the challenge.

"I don't see the 'Rampart of Carcassonne,'" said the colonel, laughing; "it can't be that hippopotamus in the red breeches, or else Mademoiselle Zélie's taste is very bad.

"Let us go in if only to find out," replied Antonia. "Manoël, give me your zinc ball and take four front seats. These gentlemen have their hands full."

The Brazilian didn't need to be told twice. He had had enough of the Grasshopper's whims for one day, and hoped that this would be the last of them. The challenge business at the door was just over. The fellows carrying the knotted handkerchiefs came in pell-mell with the paying spectators. Antonia and her party followed the crowd. The colonel, who was in the rear, pushed Rangouze forward, and as the tent was but half full, they had no difficulty in finding front seats close to the ring.

Rangouze made haste to place his vases under the bench, and at once began to examine the facilities which this tented field of combat offered for a hasty departure. The exit was near at hand. There were but three or four benches to climb over to reach the door. Unfortunately, Souscarrière was beside his elbow. It was impossible to stir without the colonel's attention being attracted to his movements. Still, Rangouze was now almost sure that the old soldier had no bad intentions concerning him. The persistence which he had shown in keeping near him did not prove that he intended to cause his arrest. All the annoyances which had interrupted the journey to Saint Germain were, perhaps, but the result of chance.

"And, after all," concluded the usurer, "I am free to do as I please, and go when I like. I have only to say that I intend to return."

"What is the matter?" asked Souscarrière, "how uneasy you are?"

"I haven't an easy seat," replied Rangouze.

"The fact is, that it is suffocating here," said Souscarrière.

"The seats are badly stuffed," remarked the Grasshopper; "but we shan't stay long. We shall slip off as soon as I have seen the wrestler."

"I hope he will soon appear," said Don Manoël.

"I am very much afraid that he will be the last to come," rejoined the colonel. "But if Monsieur de Rangouze isn't well and feels unable to remain, I shall ask your permission to go home with him."

"Oh, that is not necessary," said Rangouze, "I can go alone very well."

"No, no! It would be very imprudent. You might faint away in the crowd, but if you take my arm you have nothing to fear."

"Thank you colonel, but——"

"No ceremony, my dear sir! You are very pale, and it is evident that you are far from well. Say the word and I will go with you now. Made-moiselle Antonia will excuse us."

"No need of that. I feel better. The heat made me feel rather queer at first, but it is over now. I shall remain."

"As you please. I only wished you to know that I am at your orders."

"Attention, gentlemen, they are going to begin!" exclaimed Antonia.

Rangouze did not utter a word. Souscarrière's over-obliging offers had deprived him of all wish to depart. It would be better, he thought, to remain patient during the wrestling than to have the colonel at his heels all the way to the Rue de Madrid, where he did not wish to go. However, he was not at ease. His anxiety had returned, and he was wondering how the journey to the Rueil station would end.

The man with the red breeches had now entered the ring, and was defying the members of the audience to come down and wrestle with him. Three did so, and the Hercules speedily made them touch ground. He had, it must be said, the advantage of not being encumbered by much clothing.

"Excuse me, sir," said the Grasshopper to a man in a blouse who sat behind her, "can you tell me the name of the *artist* who has been *performing* so skilfully?"

"Pavert; he is called, the 'Mastodon of Pantin,'" said the spectator, who appeared to be a frequenter of such scenes.

"When will the 'Rampart of Carcassonne' appear?"

"Crombard? He has gone to take a drink with some chaps he threw. But he will return at the end, after the French boxing and the fencing."

"Thank you, sir."

"And he will take the 'Mastodon' in hand. Then you'll see some fun!"

"I am extremely obliged to you, sir."

This dialogue caused the Brazilian to stare in utter amazement. He could not understand how Antonia talked familiarly with a man who was many removes from a gentleman. Souscarrière was laughing in his sleeve; but he did not give in. He seemed to think the capers of the Grasshopper quite natural, and looked on as prim as though he had been in the best society imaginable. Rangouze, whom he still kept close to, tried to put a good face on the matter and did not succeed in the least. He was perspiring profusely, but he did not dare to wipe his forehead for fear of disarranging his spectacles and wig. He constantly turned round to look at the way out, and he started every time that the colonel said to him in a low tone: "Will you go now? Don't put yourself out. You can lean on my arm all the way."

In accordance with the programme, the "Mastodon," who remained conqueror in the ring, next defied the audience to master him at French boxing, vulgarly called *la savate*. Only one champion appeared, and one whose fragile appearance excited the laughter of the spectators—a little stunted fellow, who must have learned to box at public balls, and who began by walking round the Hercules at a distance, the fat man standing meantime in the centre of the ring with his arms close to his body and his legs apart like the Colossus of Rhodes.

"I bet ten louis on the little fellow!" exclaimed the Grasshopper. "Do you take the bet, Rangouze?"

"Anything you like," said Rangouze, who was thinking of something else.

The amateur still walked round the Hercules, making a smaller circle each time, and the big man, unaccustomed to such proceedings, began to look anxious.

"I will take half your bet," said Souscarrière.

"Then it's agreed, colonel! We shall take supper on Rangouze's money."

Antonia was still talking when the Hercules, seeing that his adversary was within reach, gave him a kick on the hip which sent him ten paces off. "Ha! ha! I think that I have won!" laughed Rangouze, who was not sorry to see his persecutor interested in the struggle.

"Not at all, it is a trick of the little fellow," said Antonia.

The little fellow, as she called him, had risen and was beginning to walk faster than ever round the "Mastodon." This circular movement was not more successful the second time than the first. A kick from the "Mastodon" sent him off to a considerable distance amidst the applause of the lookers-on. At the third round, this singular "amateur" had enough of it and retired, escorted by the hooting of the public.

"We have decidedly lost," said the Grasshopper, "I shall never believe in little men again. Rangouze, I owe you a hundred francs."

"And I owe you a hundred, too," said the colonel. "We shall settle our bet presently. Let's see what new example of skill the man in red is going to give us now. Ah! he has a couple of foils—he is going round the ring to find some one to accept his challenge—but he can't find anybody. He can't be hard to touch, the big porpoise! If we were in a fencing-school, I would soon cover him with marks."

"I should like to see that," said Antonia.

"Aha! he has found his man, a corporal of dragoons, who has taken the foil and is doffing his tunic. If I were an officer in his regiment I

would put him under arrest, to teach him to respect his uniform and not make an exhibition of himself at a fair. But I shouldn't be sorry if he gave that mountebank a good lesson."

Souscarrière was speaking rather loudly, and the Hercules overheard what he said. His vanity was touched, and he placed himself in position near the gentleman who had ventured to express the hope that he would be ultimately defeated.

The assault began, and at the very first passes, it was evident that the dragoon was not up to the mark. He guarded himself well, but he had neither a good style of thrust nor a firm footing. Instead of urging the "Mastodon" on, so as to make him lose his breath, he let him attack him, and all his parries did not prevent his receiving two direct strokes from his antagonist, whose arm seemed to be of iron.

Souscarrière was passionately fond of fencing, and this spectacle, which was humiliating for the army, made him forget his main purpose, that of watching Rangouze.

"Bad!" he muttered, between each thrust. "It would have been easy enough to parry that thrust, you should have made a feint and replied below. Good! that second told! You ought to turn your sword round his! If that is the way that regimental fencing-masters teach the men now-a-days, they have been going backward since I left the army."

As Rangouze saw him become more and more excited, he began to grow hopeful again, and made ready to profit by the chance that might be offered him if the old soldier became altogether engrossed in the fencing.

"Ah! at last!" resumed the colonel, "that is an easy thrust and not bad! I think that the big fellow was touched."

"The man who can touch Bibi is not alive yet," growled the "Mastodon of Pantin." At the same time he began a series of well-combined thrusts which forced his adversary to recoil to the edge of the ring. The dragoon, thus driven back almost upon the benches, abandoned his foil and began to put on his tunic again.

Souscarrière felt inclined to thrash him, to punish him for so badly sustaining the honour of the French cavalry service. He was so excited that he had risen and was gesticulating, to the great amusement of the gallery, and particularly of the lively Antonia, whom the colonel's eccentricities amused beyond everything.

Rangouze had not yet dared to stir, but he was making ready to do so.

"Whose turn is it now?" asked the Hercules, with an air of defiance. "Is there anybody in this honourable company who will do me the honour to fence with me?" And addressing Souscarrière, he added: "You know, citizen, that if you like, you need only say so. I have a home-thrust ready for you."

"Your home-thrusts don't amount to much," replied the colonel, carried away by his ardour for fencing. "You are rapid, but you extricate your weapon badly. I could parry all your thrusts with my grandmother's spit."

"I should like to see you do so, but in the meantime just take that foil and off with your coat. I will lend you a jacket, as you are a swell, but I could cover your cambric shirt-front with button-holes."

Souscarrière shrugged his shoulders and sat down again.

"You won't do it?" cried the Hercules. "Very well, then, don't try to disgust other people. Who wants to try? No one says anything. I suppose the army has had about enough."

At the same time the fellow flourished his foil almost in the face of the colonel, who, this time, lost patience and seized the weapon, leaped over the balustrade and placed himself on guard.

"Good ! good !" exclaimed the Grasshopper, at once standing up like many other spectators who did not wish to miss this unexpected addition to the programme.

"Do you mean to fence like that, with your coat on ?" sneered the "Mastodon," crossing foils with his antagonist. "If I tear your fine broad-cloth it will be your own fault, citizen."

But the jesting colossus did not laugh long. In less than a minute, Souscarrière had not only forced him to pay attention to what he was about, but had touched him three times ; and while making his foil rattle against that of the Hercules, he amused himself with counting aloud the number of times he touched him.

"Four ! five ! we shall go on to seven, so that you may have all the buttons on your waistcoat complete."

The audience stamped with joy. Antonia clapped her hands and exclaimed aloud, to the horror of Don Manoël. "Long live the colonel ! The 'Mastodon of Pantin' is beaten ! What do you say to that, Rangouze ? You couldn't do that, my good soul !"

The name of Rangouze, pronounced by Antonia in her usual piercing tones, recalled the excited Souscarrière too late to the thought that he had not come to Neuilly to fence.

"I won't finish you off to-day. The lesson you have had is enough," he said, lowering his foil.

But on turning round he did not perceive the usurer among the inquisitive spectators who had risen. "Where is Monsieur de Rangouze ?" he suddenly asked.

"He has gone !" replied Antonia. "He has no taste at all for fencing, it seems."

Souscarrière did not wait for an explanation. Without hesitating for a second, and without even dropping the foil he held, he plunged into the midst of the throng, like a wild boar bursting through a thicket.

"Where are you going, colonel ?" exclaimed the Grasshopper.

"To pay Rangouze for the bet that we lost," replied Souscarrière, darting out of the booth.

"The devil ! he is off with my larding pin !" bawled the Hercules.

"We'll pay you for it," said Antonia.

When Souscarrière reached the avenue, Rangouze had found time to get ahead. He had begun to run as fast as he could without reflecting which way he was going, and in his confusion he had gone in the direction of Porte-Maillet. The colonel, who had already given up all expectation of being able to find him among the promenaders, saw a crowd ahead of him and went up to see what was the matter.

Rangouze was struggling with two lusty fellows who held him by the arms. Four policemen, who had run up to help their comrades, kept back the loafers, who are always ready to help a man who is being arrested. A cab stood twenty paces off, and Souscarrière had the satisfaction of beholding the capture of the rascal upon whom he had mounted guard for five hours and thirty-five minutes.

It was done in the twinkle of an eye, and the old soldier was still wondering how it happened that the detectives had been on hand to catch the scoundrel, when he knocked against Marius Guénégaud, who explained

the matter in two words. Not seeing any one come, and tired of waiting at the city gate, where he had taken up his stand with the policemen, the usurer's clerk had gone ahead to reconnoitre, and Rangouze, running like mad, had come full tilt against a member of the police staff, who had only to close his arms around him and hold him fast.

Souscarrière did not spare his thanks to the man to whom this successful capture was due. He even went so far as to shake hands with him. But the satisfaction he felt was mingled with bitterness, for he said to himself: "I have done my duty. The innocent won't suffer for the guilty. But those whom I love won't thank me for this. As long as Estelan remained in prison, it was but the prologue. Now the drama is about to begin, and heaven knows how it will end!"

III.

THREE days after Rascaillon's arrest, Louis Vallouris was still in prison, owing to the many formalities attendant upon legal proceedings in France. After all, perhaps it is better that such matters should be dealt with leisurely, for the error which occurred as to M. de Maugars' son-in-law proves that haste is an evil. Madeleine, who believed herself to be a widow, might have married Guy de Bautru, and have become a bigamist in utter innocence.

The investigating magistrate would not now come to a final decision until Louis' innocence was well established. Three days had been occupied in questioning the fellow arrested at Neuilly, and in examining witnesses, confronting them with the honest man who for ten years had been suspected of the theft. This work had been greatly facilitated by Aubijoux's preliminary proceedings. The witnesses had been brought from Marseilles and Algeria at his expense, and he had conducted the whole affair with rare wisdom and ardour.

Estelan learned the happy news on the morning of the fourth day. The police official who had gone to arrest him a couple of months previously, allowed himself the pleasure of communicating the good tidings, which Estelan received calmly enough, for he had expected them. But he evinced some surprise on hearing that a certain M. Souscarrière, a friend of M. de Maugars, wished to see him as soon as he left the prison, having a very important communication to make to him.

Estelan intended to go at first to see M. Aubijoux, not only to thank him for his generous help, but to ask for some information as to the state of affairs at Vésinet. Since the catastrophe which had followed the wedding, the released man had scarcely seen the millionaire. He had remained but twenty-four hours at the villa, and prudently enough Aubijoux had but seldom visited him while he remained hidden at Le Pailleux's house.

Prior to his misfortunes, Estelan had sometimes heard his father-in-law speak of Souscarrière, but he had never heard of Guy de Bautru, and only vaguely remembered bowing to a gentleman of that name in the vestry of La Trinite. He was in a situation somewhat similar to that of a man who goes to sleep on the eve of a revolution, and wakes up to find France altogether changed.

Before resolving to hide himself until his innocence were proved, he had weighed all the advantages and disadvantages attendant upon his

disappearance. He expected nothing good of the Count de Maugars until he was cleared. The haughty nobleman would never pardon a stain upon his honour. Thus fixed on this point, Estelan had not troubled himself as to what the count might think of his absence, or do, or say. He had only thought of Madeleine, and had relied on her alone.

He loved her passionately, and believed himself to be loved by her. Abruptly severed from her, he had asked himself how she would regard his disappearance, and he had not doubted for an instant but what she would take his part against those who accused him, even against her father himself; she had faith in him only, he thought, and waited with firmness and confidence for the hour when he would reappear. Believing that he knew Madeleine's heart, he thought she would divine why he did not reappear, so he did not even allow himself the privilege of writing to her, feeling sure that she would understand the motives which urged him to avoid all intercourse with her, as long as she was obliged to blush for the name he had conferred upon her by marriage.

To present himself before her was to expose her to a frightful scene, and compel her to choose between her father and her husband. To write was to incur the risk of the letter falling into the hands of M. de Maugars, and this might cause trouble between the father and the daughter.

The language of flowers was all that remained to poor Estelan, and he had thought that by throwing some flowers every night into Madeleine's garden he might convey to her the idea that he still hoped and that he did not despair of seeing her again. This, he thought, would give her courage, and it was all he hoped to do as yet. Up to the moment of Rangouze's arrest he had not been able to accomplish anything else as concerns his wife.

Strong in his innocence, his love and his rights, Louis Vallouris, cleared by the same authorities who had accused him, now left his prison, head erect, and determined to claim Madeleine from her father. He did not intend to employ force. He meant, on the contrary, to fall at her feet, and ask her pardon for all the sorrow that her marriage with him had brought upon her, and to implore as a simple favour what he might have exacted as a right. His desire to see M. Aubijoux arose from his wish to avoid everything that might give rise to painful complications.

People cannot come to life again without causing some trouble, and Estelan did not wish to arrive suddenly at Vésinet, where he might find himself, unexpectedly, in presence of Madeleine. Surprise and joy sometimes kill. It was necessary to spare the young girl, to prepare her for meeting the husband she had mourned, and Aubijoux alone could do this. He had previously told Vallouris that he was ready to serve him in all things. So the released man now resolved to see him, and took a cab to Auteuil. He would have been glad if the horses had been winged steeds, for he longed to talk with M. Aubijoux, and to start with him for Vésinet.

Outwardly cold, Estelan, none the less, possessed a soul of fire. Experience had formed his character, but it had not made him cynical. His heart was as youthful as a boy's. At thirty, after ten years' struggling and adventures, he still believed in noble things; he nourished all the illusions which had led him to fight for France when she was invaded. He was ready to sacrifice himself for the only woman whom he had ever loved, just as he had sacrificed himself for his country. Brave and resolute, he was a man to follow up a purpose despite every obstacle.

Those who had blamed the Count de Maugars for giving his daughter

to a man who was not known in Parisian society, would have congratulated him had they been aware of the true value of his son-in-law's bold and affectionate nature. To make his wife's heart his own again all that Estelan had needed was time. When he was courting her in M. de Maugars' drawing-room she had not been able to appreciate anything beyond her suitor's distinguished bearing and courtly manners, and the lofty views he had expressed. A timid man does not reveal all that he feels to a young girl, and Estelan was timid in the best sense of that word. He would have risked his life a hundred times, but he did not dare to declare his love; he did not know how to utter passionate words, those which fools and fops speak so freely, and which seem so commonplace in frivolous society. He was too deeply and sincerely in love with Madeleine to be able to tell it her in besitting terms. She knew nothing of the treasures of goodness and love which he concealed as carefully as others hide their vices, and an unheard-of disaster had separated her from her husband before she could know aught of his generous and impassioned nature.

His recent misfortunes had not changed either his person or his temper. He was still the elegant-looking man whom the guests at the wedding had admired. There was a scar upon his forehead and he had shaved off his moustache, but an innate look of distinction does not leave a man's face, and that was his main characteristic: he had delicate features, large, soft black eyes, a slight figure, a pale aristocratic complexion, and a proud, cold bearing which was very impressive.

When he alighted from the cab in front of the villa on the Boulevard Montmorency the doorkeeper did not know him, but he saw at once that this was no business man, and as soon as Estelan told him his name, he replied that M. Aubijoux had been waiting for him the day before, but had now gone out, and would not return until very late.

Estelan had not foreseen this disappointment. He was ignorant of the conjugal misfortunes of his friend, and had hoped that, as Aubijoux knew he might be set at liberty at any moment, he would have waited for him at Auteuil, or at least have left word where he might be found. But no word had been left. All that the doorkeeper knew was that M. Aubijoux had not gone to his office on the Boulevard Poissonnière, for his head clerk had come the evening before for some instructions as to what he was to do on the following day. The doorkeeper added that his master had no doubt gone into the country with M. Le Pailleur, who had spent the previous night with him.

Estelan, greatly annoyed and surprised, could not think of presenting himself at so early an hour before Madame Aubijoux. He did not know her well, and besides he presumed that she was at the sea-side, or some other summer resort, for the shutters of the villa were closed. He got sadly into his cab again, and as he needed time to plan what he would do next, he told the driver to take him back to Paris through the Champs Elysées. He had not the least desire to return to his rooms in the Rue de Rome, and he did not care to see the house where he had been hidden for a month.

Le Pailleur was absent as well as Aubijoux. Where should he go then? To whom should he confide his anxieties? Whom should he question respecting M. de Maugars' feelings toward him?

Beyond the two friends who had taken his part, Estelan was not intimately acquainted with any one in Paris. There was Prunevaux, who had been

mixed up in the affair of the marriage contract, but he had never felt any confidence in the notary, and did not care to apply to him.

He was now reduced to the extremity of asking himself whether it would not be best to go straight to Vésinet, at the risk of meeting with a bad reception from his father-in-law, when all at once he remembered M. Souscarrière. The police officials had told him that this gentleman was staying at the Grand Hôtel, and that he had an important communication to make to him. From whom, unless from the count himself?

Estelan said to himself that he might regret it if he did not call upon the gentleman in question, for he concluded that what he had to say must relate to his present position. M. Souscarrière was, no doubt, ready to prepare the absent son-in-law's return, and tell him what to do to bring about a reconciliation. It was therefore better to go and see him at once.

Accordingly, Estelan now drove to the Grand Hôtel.

At the office there he was told that orders had been given that any one who called between ten and eleven should be taken to M. Souscarrière in a sitting room on the ground floor. "Can he be expecting me?" said Estelan to himself. "He must have known that I would be released this morning."

However, he kept his thoughts to himself and followed the waiter for whom the man at the door had rung. The waiter took him across the main courtyard, and conducted him down a long passage to a door which he opened without knocking.

Estelan, somewhat surprised, entered a room, in the centre of which he saw a round dining-table with covers laid for three. The waiter closed the door, and he remained alone. He wondered what all this meant, and the first thought that occurred to him was that M. de Maugars' friend had prepared an agreeable surprise for him.

The pretty room, the breakfast about to be served, and all the preparations he saw, might imply rejoicings at his release and a signal of peace. Trembling with emotion, Estelan now asked himself whether Madeleine might not presently appear at this gathering arranged by an old friend of the family. This friend, whose name was all that he knew, now seemed to him a kind of saviour. He blessed him before seeing him, and resolved to show him how grateful he could be.

He was pondering in this fashion when the door abruptly opened and in came a man, whom he recognised from his height and military bearing, having heard him described as an ex-chasseur d'Afrique and the handsomest man in the regiment to which he had belonged. He was not mistaken. It was indeed Bautru's uncle, who had come to receive some expected guests. He soon showed, however, that he was not expecting Estelan that day, and especially not to breakfast.

"I have engaged this room, sir," said Souscarrière, unceremoniously. "It is through some mistake that the waiter has brought you here, and I must beg—"

"The waiter was not mistaken," replied Estelan. "I asked for Monsieur Souscarrière, and I think I have the honour of speaking to him."

"You are right, sir, but I have not the honour of knowing you, and I must beg you to explain—"

"I am Louis d'Estelan," replied Madeleine's husband, quietly.

"You!" exclaimed the old soldier. "Impossible! the man you speak of is in prison."

"I was set free an hour ago."

Souscarrière looked more attentively at his unexpected visitor, and asked, in a rough tone: "What did you come here for?"

"You requested that I should do so," replied Estelan.

"Who told you so?"

"The chief of the detective-police, who said that you went to the prefecture for the express purpose of inviting me to call here."

"That was four days ago. I had forgotten."

"Very well. But as you asked to see me, you must have had some reason for doing so. What do you want with me?"

"I wish to speak to you respecting the situation in which you have placed my best friend. But this is not the time for it. I did not know that you would make your appearance here where I am expecting some one else. Let it go this morning, sir. Later on to-day, if you wish, I will have a talk with you."

"I wish to have it now."

"Do you? Well, then, I refuse. I don't take orders, I give them, and I repeat that you cannot remain here."

"That is as much as to say that you turn me out of the room. You shall give me satisfaction for this."

"As you please, and when you please."

"This evening, then. I shall be back in Paris, and I will then send my seconds to you."

"You will be back in Paris, you say? Where are you going, then, now?"

"I am not obliged to reply, still I will tell you that I am going to see the Count de Maugars. I understand that he lives at Vésinet."

"And you intend to go to see him?"

"At once. I ought to have done so before. I should have been spared the annoyance of making your acquaintance."

Souscarrière was anything but patient, but instead of replying he took out his watch, looked at it, and then touched an electric bell.

"If I am asked for," he said to the waiter who appeared, "you will see that the persons wait in the main gallery." Then, turning to Estelan, he added, in an abrupt tone: "You are right, sir. We must have an explanation without delay. I have time to hear you and reply to you before my guests arrive."

"Well, then, sir, answer me by telling me why you wished to see me."

"To tell you, in the first place, that it will be of no use for you to present yourself at the Count de Maugars' house. He has made up his mind not to receive you."

"I shall force him to do so."

"Try it, sir! I warn you that you will fail. And now, what course do you intend to pursue as regards Mademoiselle de Maugars?"

"I do not know any Mademoiselle de Maugars. I only know Madame d'Estelan, my wife."

"That signifies, I suppose, that you intend to assert your legal rights over the young lady, who had the misfortune to marry you?"

"Can you doubt it?"

"Yes, for I always thought that in spite of the appearances against you, you were in reality a gentleman."

"I am very much obliged to you for your good opinion," replied Estelan, sarcastically, "but I should like to know in what way I should act un-gentlemanly in taking back my wife?"

"Listen to me, sir; and if you listen without prejudice you will see that, as regards my friend Maugars' daughter, events have placed you in an exceptional position."

"The events to which you allude are such as no one could have foreseen; it is I, especially, who have had to suffer from them, and I cannot justly be reproached. If, when I asked for Mademoiselle de Maugars' hand, I had supposed that I should be accused, or that I was accused already of a shameful act, I should have acted very wrongly in disregarding such a state of things, and I should deserve contempt. However, such was not the case. I have been the victim of a strange fatality."

"I admit that, sir. But this fatality has had most terrible results. In one day Monsieur de Maugars found his name disgraced and his daughter's happiness destroyed."

"His name is no more disgraced than mine is, and I will take care of his daughter's happiness."

Souscarrière was silent for a moment. He was thinking for some pretext that would enable him attain his object.

"Did you ever think," asked he, "of what may have happened at Monsieur de Maugars' house since you disappeared?"

"I know what happened," replied Estelan, without the least hesitation. "A friend had taken my cause in hand, and told me all that was of interest to me."

"Monsieur Aubijoux, I presume? I know him. He could not have told you anything, as he did not know anything to tell."

"He knew that Monsieur de Maugars and his daughter had left their rooms in the Rue Saint-Lazare and gone to Vésinet. He told me so, and I was not surprised. That was the best thing to do after what took place on the wedding-day."

"You admit that? I am very glad, but you no doubt also understand that this change of abode was but a feeble means of preventing the scandal which ran all over Paris. Monsieur de Maugars was obliged to seek silence and forgetfulness. It was not in a suburban villa that he could hope to find peace. I was the first to advise him to leave France, for some years, at least."

"Has he determined to do so?"

"He has, and if he delays the matter it is only because a fresh misfortune has befallen him."

"Misfortune! Is his daughter ill?"

"No. His daughter did not give way in spite of the terrible shock which she met with. But his fortune, you know, was in the hands of a notary."

"Prunevaux?"

"Yes, who drew up your marriage contract, and had excellent information concerning you. Well, he has spent the money which Maugars placed in his hands, and has run away."

"Fortunately my fortune was not in his hands. I shall only be too happy to place it at Monsieur de Maugars' disposal."

"He will not, he cannot accept it. I told you that he has made up his mind to go abroad."

"He is free to go."

"With his daughter?"

"No, sir. The power of a father does not extend so far. Besides, my wife would not consent to go with him abroad."

"She has consented, however."

"Because he has led her to believe that I should be convicted, and that she would never see me again. But if the expectations of my enemies had been realised, she would not have deserted me in these evil days."

"In other words, you believe that she would have gone to live in the town where you were imprisoned. You have a high idea, indeed, of your power as a husband."

"No, sir, but I have a high idea of my wife's courage, and the nobility of her feelings. She knows that her place is with me, no matter what may happen."

This was said in such a tone that Souscarrière realised that he was following a wrong course.

"I shall not attempt to discuss the matter," he replied. "We are not reasoning as to a woman's duty, or conjecturing what your wife might do in a case that has not presented itself. You are free, you will not be troubled again, and you have a right to act as though nothing had occurred, as though the poor girl whom you claim as imperiously as a master demands his slave, had not had her wedding-day changed into a scene of lamentation. But I have a right to ask how you propose to force her to obey you, for I am the friend and brother in arms of her father, and I love her as though she were my own daughter."

"Force her!" exclaimed Estelan, most bitterly.

"Yes. Will you oblige her to join you in the conjugal abode, as the law allows you to do? Will you force her *manu militari*? Will you call in the police? That is fashionable just now, but in the society in which Mademoiselle de Maugars moves and always would have moved such things are never done."

"Enough, sir! You forget that you have to give me satisfaction for your insolence in the first place, and you compel me to remind you that it is not allowable for you to insult a man who will soon be your adversary on the duelling-ground."

"I am not insulting you. I am endeavouring to make you acknowledge that your plan is a mad one, that there are cases in which the law is powerless, and that violent measures ought not to be adopted against a woman."

"Who speaks of such measures? Do you imagine that if I were driven to that extremity, I should not, a thousand times, prefer to disappear for ever?"

"Very good! Then you imagine that all you have to do is to say to Mademoiselle de Maugars: 'You have been told that I had committed a theft; you are deceived. I ran away like a thief, that is true: I concealed myself: I allowed you for a long time to mourn over your disgrace. I suffered you to believe all the slander that was told you as regards me. I did not even take the trouble to reassure you; why should I have done so? You belong soul and body to me, and I have only to appear to claim possession of what belongs to me. I have been in prison, but I have come out, and I shall not go back again. We shall take a wedding trip. We meant to do so, but it has been postponed. Here I am! Let us go to Switzerland.'"

"No, sir," said Estelan, coldly, "I should not use the absurd language which you are pleased to utter. I should say to her: 'I love you more ardently than ever for what you have suffered on my account, and I know that you have never ceased to love me.'"

"You know that!" exclaimed Souscarrière. "Are you quite sure of it?"

At this question, which came like a sword-thrust from Bautru's uncle, Estelan turned pale, and after a moment's silence, replied: "What do you mean, sir? Do you presume to assert that my wife is unfaithful to me?"

"Do you, sir, presume to assert that your wife is called upon to love you after what has happened?" replied Souscarrière.

"No evasion, sir! Say what you mean! Do you assert that the woman who bears my name is deceiving me?"

"I say nothing of the kind; but, as you force me to do so, I declare to you that Mademoiselle de Mangars no longer loves you."

"How do you know this? She has taken you for a confidant, I presume?"

"I have seen for myself."

"What have you seen?" asked Estelan, and as Souscarrière hesitated to reply, he added: "Take care, sir! You are about to slander a virtuous woman."

"You wish to hear the truth? When Madeleine married you, she simply obeyed her father. You did not repel, on the contrary you attracted her. But she had nothing more than a mere liking or friendship for you. It might have become love, and I believe that it would. I am certain that in any case Madeleine would never have forgotten what she had promised, providing the tie which bound you had not been broken."

"That undoubtedly means that she would have been faithful to me as long as I was beside her, and that I had only to go away to lead her to believe herself free from every vow?"

"You do not understand. Madeleine was faithful to you in the sense which you attach to that word. She belongs to a race which does not trifle with honour. But her heart is not yours."

"Is it another's?"

"Before knowing you she loved another, without being aware that she loved him. She was then almost a child. She did not know her own heart, and when her father, who did not approve of this attachment, told her that he had chosen you for his son-in-law, she agreed to marry you. Out of a hundred young girls, ninety would have done as she did. You know very well, yourself, that it was what is called 'a marriage of reason,' for you knew Mademoiselle de Mangars very slightly, and you were especially interested in the advantageous features of the match."

"You are now slandering me, sir. If I had not loved Mademoiselle de Mangars, I should not have sought to marry her, even if she had been twenty times as rich or as noble. It is true I did not reflect that she might have loved already, for she was, as you have just said yourself, a mere child. But, before marrying her, I studied her character, I learned to know her heart, and you cannot make me believe that she has taken advantage of the undeserved sorrows which have fallen upon me to give her heart to some second cousin or other whom she knew before she met me."

"There is no cousin in the matter. He whom she loved is a man."

"And Monsieur de Mangars has made him welcome, after forcing him to leave his house! Really, sir, you place your friend in a very bad light, and yourself also, if—as what you say leads me to believe—you have thus favoured the odious designs of a seducer who has taken advantage of my absence and a young woman's weakness and inexperience."

Souscarrière started at these insulting words. The charge they implied

was false, but Estelan could not know that it was so, as he was ignorant of everything that had taken place in the count's house since the first catastrophe. And Souscarrière, anxious to repel such a disgraceful accusation, resolved to reveal everything.

"I have but one word to say, sir," he replied calmly, "to prove that your accusation is ungrounded. The daughter of my friend Maugars was free to love another, for she believed that this feeling, the only true love and the first love that she ever felt, would end in marriage. She believed herself to be a widow."

"That is impossible!" exclaimed Estelan.

"Nothing could be more natural, on the contrary, and you will soon see that it was so. When you leaped from the window, Madeleine entered the room, and her father, who thought that you were killed, dragged her away to prevent her from seeing the frightful sight. He told her that you had fallen by accident, and that you had not survived the fall. The woman whom you now accuse almost died of grief on hearing that she would see you no more."

"But this was a cruel falsehood!"

"The Count de Maugars believed that you were dead. He saw you lying on the grass in the garden with blood round about you; he could not imagine that heaven had worked a miracle in your favour. It was only in the evening, ten hours after your fall, that a detective told him that you had found strength to rise, and had disappeared. Maugars then lacked the courage to undeceive his daughter."

"The courage?"

"Yes, the courage. By hiding from Madeleine the fact that you still lived, he spared her fresh grief. Don't you see that if he had told her the truth he would have been forced to reveal that you were accused of theft?"

"What! doesn't she know that?"

"She knows nothing, and she has believed from her wedding day forward that she was a widow. You will now admit that she might return to her first feelings without being intentionally guilty."

"I admit that she only loved through ignorance, and I am aware that she was incapable of having knowingly failed in her duty. But in justifying her, sir, you have condemned her father. He knew the truth; he knew that I was not dead, that I had only gone away to prepare my justification; he knew very well that I should return, but he did not hesitate to allow another man to pay attentions to his daughter; he has encouraged criminal hopes, and authorised interviews. How do you qualify such a course?"

"He acted rightly. He thought, and so did I, that Madeleine would learn the disgrace which threatened her husband only too soon, that it was better to leave her in ignorance of the truth until your unfortunate affair had ended in conviction or acquittal. But he felt the danger of so false a situation, and he took precautions. He forbade the young man whom Mademoiselle de Maugars had formerly loved to visit his house."

"But you said just now that you had seen him there?"

"Yes, afterwards."

"Then Monsieur de Maugars' scruples did not last long," retorted Estelan, with bitter irony.

"They lasted until he also believed that his daughter had become a widow."

"I do not understand you."

"Didn't the judicial authorities tell you that a week after your disappearance, the body of an unfortunate man was found in the Bois de Boulogne? This man had shot himself in the head with a pistol, and a letter addressed to you was found beside him. He was supposed to be you. It was stated that you had killed yourself, and after this had been reported and generally believed and the certificate of decease was being made out, you were arrested."

"It is not true! The magistrate would have told me."

"If he did not do so, it was because it reflected upon the sagacity of the police. Maugars long believed it to be true, and so did I and others."

"And you were glad, no doubt, to be rid of an innocent man who was in your way?"

"None of us knew that you were innocent, and your death prevented complications which we feared. You see that I am frank. No, we did not mourn when we were told that you had killed yourself, and it was then, but not until then, that the Count de Maugars allowed his daughter to receive the man who had but one desire, which was to marry her, and console her. What father, I ask you, would not have done the same? Was Mademoiselle de Maugars to be condemned to perpetual widowhood because she had the misfortune to be bound to a suicide?"

Estelan, pale, nervous, and angry, listened to these explanations with haughty impatience. "I will not insult you, sir," he curtly answered, "by doubting what you say. The fatality which pursues me has caused people to believe that I was dead. So be it! This incredible concurrence of circumstances somewhat diminishes Monsieur de Maugars' faultiness and yours, but it is now five days since I was arrested. You were not ignorant of that."

"No. The authorities told my friend of it the next day."

"You have known for four days, then, that my wife was not a widow. What have you done to put an end to a situation which was only excusable from the error into which you had fallen?"

"All that could possibly be done. The young man who was to marry Mademoiselle de Maugars has ceased to visit her. And he is all the more meritorious, as he is madly in love with her. He will perhaps die of grief. But he has too much right feeling, and too much respect for the woman whom he once hoped to marry, to compromise her by continuing to visit Monsieur de Maugars. He has even made up his mind to enlist and go to Africa, without thought of ever returning. Could we do more? What fault can you find with us?"

"With you? None," replied Estelan, in a husky voice.

"And will you now persist in the resolution which you spoke of?" asked Souscarrière, with almost as much emotion as was shown by Madeleine's husband. "Will you exact that your wife should return to you? Can you flatter yourself that you can win the love of her heart now that she has felt love for another; or will you suffer this poor woman to go away and endeavour to find rest and peace far from the country where she has suffered so much?"

"I have suffered, and shall suffer more than she. You forget the horrible anguish which I have endured. You forget that I have been unjustly accused of an infamous act, and obliged to fly, to hide myself like a malefactor; that those who ought to have defended me turned against me, that I have been arrested and thrown into prison. And at

the moment when I have proved my innocence, when I come out of all this trouble perfectly cleared, when I think of recovering my lost happiness, you say to me, 'Renounce the wife whom you adore; do not go to your father-in-law's house. He hates you, and she no longer loves you. Resign yourself. Try to console yourself with the thought that if she is not yours, she will, at least, not belong to any one else.' I might content myself with this sorry compensation, if my wife were an object of indifference to me, but I love her, and I wish to hear all that you have told me from her own lips. I require that she shall say to me herself—'I have never loved you, but I have never done anything to prevent you from believing that I loved you. You fancied that I did. So much the worse for you. You adore me. It is a pity. I should have endured you in order not to vex my father, but now my father's views have changed. I love another, and my father countenances my changed affection. You are in my way. Disappear, and do not annoy me.'"

"Mademoiselle de Maugars would not say any such words to you," said Souscarrière, shaking his head. "She would reply: 'You are the master of my destiny, and I am ready to expiate the wrong I have done you, unintentionally.' But I tell you that if you appear before her you will kill her as certainly as though you had stabbed her with a dagger."

"Then she hopes," exclaimed Estelan, angrily, "that it will suffice to tell me that she does not want to have anything to do with me to keep me from seeing her? No! it is impossible that she can be so deceived! She knows me well enough to be aware that I am neither a fool nor a coward, and she must expect a visit from me. It is probably to escape that visit that she intends to leave France."

"You are mistaken, sir. Madeleine de Maugars does not expect a visit from you, for she is not yet aware that you are alive, and I repeat that if you appear before her, surprise and terror will kill her."

"Then the Count de Maugars, although knowing that I still live, has seen fit to allow his daughter to remain in error, such as he has kept up since I was no longer near to confound him? I understand. He hoped that I should be kept in prison until he had time to carry my wife away to foreign parts."

"He wished to avoid a painful scene."

"Say rather that he feared Madeleine would refuse to go with him after she had seen me. Well, then, he shall be punished for intending to commit a bad action. This morning, when I was released I hesitated about presenting myself before him without informing him that I intended to do so. I wished that he should announce my visit, and prepare his daughter to receive me. But now I have no further reason for ceremony, and I shall go at once to Vésinet."

"You will find no one there. The count is not there now."

"He has gone!" exclaimed Estelan, "with her, no doubt! He has robbed me of my wife! Ah! this is too much, and I will——"

He did not finish. The door of the room opened, and a footman, wearing the livery of the Grand Hôtel, opened the door. "Your guests, sir," he said, standing aside to let some one enter.

Estelan instinctively drew back. He did not wish to meet the guests of a man whom he looked upon as an enemy. Souscarrière hastened to the door to bar the entrance of the persons whom he expected. But the door had been left open by the footman, and M. de Maugars entered with his daughter on his arm.

The waiter had not delivered Souscarrière's message, and, in consequence, the scene which he had endeavoured to prevent took place, and was violent though short. Madeleine saw her husband, and fell as if she had been struck by lightning.

Estelan, overwhelmed by the sight, was darting towards her, when Souscarrière caught him round the waist, exclaiming, "Do not approach her, sir, or I will strangle you! You have killed her, and I forbid you to touch her!"

Estelan struggled in vain. Souscarrière pushed him to the end of the room, and threw him upon a chair, while the count raised his swooning daughter.

The frightened servant called for help. But M. de Maugars did not wait for the hôtel people to appear; lifting his daughter as though she had been an infant, he carried her away, without being followed by Souscarrière, who wished first of all to finish with Madeleine's husband.

He closed the door, and then returned to Estelan, whom he found standing up.

"You see what you have done, sir," said the old soldier, half choking with rage. "Your wife, whom you profess to love, will perhaps die of this shock. Her father, most fortunately, is with her to care for her. I have to deal with you, and we must have it out."

"It is idle, sir! You have laid violent hands on me, and——"

"And I owe you a reparation. You shall have it when you choose; but you must hear me, for I have not yet told you all, and I hope that we shall never meet again, except with pistols or swords in our hands."

"So be it, then. Speak, sir! I have nothing to oppose to brutal force. But when you have finished I rely upon your not attempting to detain me."

"You shall be free to go. I warn you, however, that if you think of forcing yourself upon Madeleine when you leave me, Monsieur de Maugars is capable of blowing out your brains rather than yield his daughter up to you. Now, listen to me. I have told you the truth, you cannot doubt it now. Your wife believed that you were dead. If she survives the frightful shock which she has experienced from seeing you so suddenly, her only thought will be to fly from you. It will be for you to decide whether you wish to use the rigour of the law to force her to follow you. I have, for forty years, been the most intimate friend of the Count de Maugars. I was not with him when his daughter was born, for he lived in Louisiana at that time, but I have known her for twelve years; I am much attached to her, and should have liked to live in Paris to see her oftener. I have no children, never having been married, but I have a nephew whom I love as though he were my son, and who will be my heir——"

"Is it for the purpose of relating the story of your life that you dare to prevent me from leaving this room?" asked Estelan, who was stamping with impatience.

"Yes, sir, for this story is connected with yours," replied Souscarrière, "and it is important that you should hear what it is. My nephew is named Guy de Bautru."

Then, as he saw Estelan start and look up, he resumed: "My nephew was present at your wedding, and he needed some courage to attend it, for he had loved Mademoiselle de Maugars."

"Then it is he who——"

"Who still loves her, and would have married her at the end of her legal term of widowhood."

"Very well, then, I can understand your behaviour."

"I behaved like an honourable man. I had formerly hoped to marry my nephew to Madeleine de Maugars. It would have been a perfectly suitable match. There was nothing amiss. But Monsieur de Maugars, for reasons which he has since explained to me, opposed it. My nephew ceased his visits, and I learned that Madeleine was about to become Madame d'Estelan. Your name and person were utterly unknown to me. But I made no objection to the match, and in fact Maugars did not consult me. I was not living in Paris. However, he invited me to the ceremony. I did not reach town in time to be present, but my nephew went to the church. His feelings had not changed, and he had not got over his disappointment. He resolved to enlist. I approved of his idea, and it was settled that he should do so before the end of the year. I suppose that you can see no objection to all this?"

"None whatever."

"After the catastrophe which occurred on your wedding-day, my nephew and I did not act with less propriety than before. I offered Maugars to help him as far as I could, and to try to find you. I wished to clear up the sad affair, and silence the malicious tongues which were talking of it. I told my nephew to keep away from the count's house for fear of remark."

"But he did not do so."

"He did not go there until Madeleine was supposed to be a widow. Why should he have absented himself then? He loved her, and hoped to be able to marry her. Ought he to have abandoned her because she was in the most frightful situation in which a woman can be placed? A widow at twenty, having scarcely seen her husband, exposed to all kind of slander, and having no one but her father to protect her—her father almost an old man, who might at any moment die of grief and anxiety. I should have scorned my nephew if he had hesitated to visit her because of the prejudices of the society in which we move, a society which, no doubt, would have censured his marriage with the widow of a man who had died before freeing himself from the odium of a disgraceful charge."

"You may try to prove that Monsieur de Bantru acted very generously in endeavouring to take my wife from me," said Estelan, bitterly; "but you cannot demonstrate to me that my wife has been faultless. She forgot me much too soon."

"You only passed athwart her life, as it were, and her first love had filled her heart in her early girlhood. It came back, and it was all-powerful. Do not blame your wife, sir; accuse yourself only. If you had given the least sign of life, I swear to you that Madeleine de Maugars would have done her duty, and my nephew would have done his. He would have been in Algeria a month ago."

"I am willing to believe it, but what does it matter *now* what they would have done? I am living—they know it at present. Do you really mean to say that I ought to withdraw, to leave the field open to Monsieur Guy de Bantru?"

"You do not understand me; my nephew has nothing further to do with the matter, and he is going to enlist. I asked you if you would have the cruelty to insist upon claiming a wife who no longer loves you. I ask you that again, now that you have seen her fall insensible at her father's

feet. You have wounded her to the heart ; do you wish to finish destroying her ? ”

“ I wish to revenge myself upon all who have wronged me,” replied Estelan, in a hoarse voice.

“ That is to say, no doubt, upon her, her father, my nephew and me ? As far as she is concerned, I defy you ! You are no coward, and cowards only revenge themselves upon a woman, especially when she is innocent. As for Monsieur de Maugars, you know as well as I can tell you, that a man cannot fight a duel with his father-in-law. Besides, Maugars is going to leave the country, and you will see him no more. As for Guy de Bautru, my nephew, he would ask nothing better than to fight with you, but I have forbidden his doing so. You might kill him, but if he killed you he could not with propriety marry your widow. Between him and you, the affair is not on an equal footing.”

“ You do not suppose that such ridiculous considerations would weigh with me ? ”

“ No, but I declare to you that you shall not fight with my nephew until you have fought with me. I have the right to come before Monsieur de Bautru as we have just been insulting one another. There is even violence to be answered for, and you have no good reason for picking a quarrel with my nephew. He does not know you, nor does he owe you any reparation whatever. You could not get any seconds to take up such a cause. But I, on the contrary, have a right to come first, and I retain that right.”

“ Very well, then, I will begin with you.”

“ I have nothing to reply to those words, and I shall not refuse you satisfaction, if you require it. I will even admit that when I heard of Maugars’ troubles my first thought was to find and challenge you. It is true that I did not then know whether you were guilty or innocent. I only thought of the disgrace which your arrest inflicted upon my old comrade.”

“ Since then you look upon matters in another light,” ironically replied Estelan.

“ Yes, for I no longer doubt your innocence. I doubt it so little that I personally assisted in obtaining your release.”

“ This, I presume, is a joke.”

“ Not at all. Monsieur Aubijoux told me that you would not be set free as long as the scoundrel who had committed the theft was not arrested. I met this man in the train, when he was trying to reach the frontier, and I let the police know of this, and so he was arrested.”

“ What was your motive ? ”

“ Merely to satisfy my conscience. I knew that the wretch was guilty and that you were suffering in his place. I do not tell you this in order to effect a reconciliation between us, for I have no wish for one, especially if you do not abandon your design of persecuting my friend’s daughter. Nor do I conceal from you that I do not care how our duel ends.”

“ Thanks for your frankness ! It enables me to set aside certain considerations which might have influenced me.”

“ I shall say no more, and I will add, that I should be glad to prevent you from being able to deprive Maugars of the poor girl who does not love you.”

“ If I had hesitated to use my right, your ridiculous talk and your threats would have decided me to do so. So I beg you to tell me when

and where my seconds can meet yours. I do not wish in the state in which your friend's daughter now is, to require that she should follow me, or force her to be present at a quarrel between her father and me. I shall not see her in this hotel, but I shall find her again. Go to her, sir, go to the Count de Maugars, and inform them both that my determination cannot be shaken. Go ! what are you waiting for ? She is suffering, perhaps dying."

Souscarrière, who was greatly agitated, tried to hide the feelings which Estelan's words aroused, but he could not help both pitying and esteeming the unfortunate husband.

"She will not die," he said, curtly. "Persons don't die of their troubles at her age. Do you insist upon fighting with me?"

"You have laid your hands violently upon my person. The question you now ask is an additional insult."

"One or the other of us, then, must remain upon the duelling-ground, since anger urges you to extreme measures. Do you think that I do not know your present thoughts ? You know very well that such a duel is absurd. Your heart and reason tell you that you have no cause to find fault with me, but you are angry, and in your just anger you are trying to find fault with me for a misfortune which you do not deserve. I understand that, and in your place I should probably do as you do, but I should try to find a better adversary. Do you wish to kill some one ? Then, why don't you try to kill the scoundrel who denounced you to the police?"

"The man who denounced me?" repeated Estelan. "If I knew who he was, I would treat him as he deserves, but I don't, and even if I did I should not begin by revenging myself upon him. He is, undoubtedly, some low fellow, some police spy, perhaps. He only did what it is his business to do."

"You are mistaken, sir," replied Souscarrière. "The man is neither a spy paid by the police, nor an insignificant scamp. He did not set upon you as if you had been the first comer. He had a set purpose in denouncing you."

"You mean to say that he had some personal enmity against me ; in fact, that he is my enemy ? That may be, but what do I care for it ? It isn't he who destroyed my happiness by stealing my wife's love from me."

"No, but there is no effect without a cause. If no one had arrested you on your wedding-day, you would now be the happiest of husbands, for when Mademoiselle de Maugars married you her heart was open to being won. You deserved to be loved by her, and she would certainly have become fond of you. If no anonymous letter had been sent to inform the police that 'Louis Vallouris' was in Paris under a changed name, you would now be enjoying your honeymoon, and my nephew would have won his epaulettes. Have you never thought whence came the blow which fell upon us, one and all ?"

"When the magistrate questioned me, I asked him to let me see the letter, or rather letters, for it appears that I have been twice denounced."

"Did he do so ?"

"Yes. They were both in the same handwriting, one I had never seen before."

"Nor the man who wrote them, most likely. He has seen you, however, no doubt, but it was not against you that he had a spite."

"Against whom, then ?"

"Against Monsieur de Maugars, your father-in-law."

"And to revenge himself upon the count he attacked me?"

"It may appear improbable, but it is none the less true. We have a proof of it. The author of these infamous letters has had the audacity to declare himself. He has written to Maugars a kind of manifesto, in which he boasts of what he has done. Maugars offended him, twenty years ago, and for that length of time he has been preparing an infernal revenge."

"Tell me who he is, and I——"

"He did not sign this epistle. He simply states that he will soon show himself, and that he means to fight with Maugars to the death, but I do not believe that, and I am looking for him. Will you help me? Oh! I don't propose that you should look for him with me," resumed Souscarrière, as Estelan shook his head, "but you might furnish me with some useful information. This wretch evidently knew all about the theft committed at the establishment of Monsieur Vernègue, the oil merchant, at Marseilles; he also knew that you had returned to France, that you now called yourself Estelan, and that you were about to marry. Well, then, what I wish you to do," added Souscarrière, "is to try to recollect the past. Do you remember any man who formerly knew you at Marseilles, and who could have found you again in Paris when you returned from your long sojourn in Mexico?"

"No, sir; a good many persons knew me in Marseilles, but since my return from America, I have not met one of them."

"Whom have you met in Paris?"

"No one, or almost no one—Aubijoux, whom I received at my house in Mexico, and who received me here as an old friend; Baron Neufgermain, to whom I was introduced by a letter from one of our consuls—it was at his house that I met Monsieur de Maugars, but I did not go there more than three or four times."

"Is that all?"

"Yes; I lived at first very retired, and when I began to visit the Count de Maugars he was receiving but little company."

"Then you never met this man, Rangouze, whom I had arrested."

"Never, I am certain, for I should have recognised him as Rascaillon, my fellow townsman, and have spoken to him."

"Prunevaux, the notary, knew nothing of your past life."

"Nothing whatever. It was Aubijoux who sent me to him, and I only had a business connection with him."

"That is what I thought. You never met a Monsieur Frédoc?"

"No."

"Neither here nor in Marseilles?"

"Nowhere. This is the first time I have ever heard the name."

There was a pause after these words. Souscarrière, seeing that he had accomplished nothing by his questions, brought back the conversation to a subject of closer interest for the time being. "I beg you to excuse my asking so many questions, sir," said he, "and I thank you for having replied to them. Now——"

"I replied," interrupted Estelan, "to prove to you that I am perfectly self-possessed, and that in exacting reparation from you I am not yielding to passing anger. But before we part I wish a clear reply: To whom shall I send my seconds, and when can I do so?"

"To-morrow morning, if you wish. Between now and then I shall find an old comrade of mine in the Rue du Helder; he will represent me and I will let you know his name and address when I know yours."

"You can write to me, care of Monsieur Aubijoux at the Boulevard Montmorency. I do not know where I shall reside."

"Very well, sir. Monsieur Aubijoux is a gentleman, and you could not make a better choice. But I advise you to consult him as to the cause of our duel; he may give you good advice. Allow me now to return to your situation as regards the Count de Maugars and his daughter. I shall be brief, and you will hear neither blame nor advice from me. I wish to inform you of some points which concern you as much as they concern me, and even more."

Estelan still maintained his formal attitude, but listened.

"I told you," resumed Souscarrière, "that Maugars had made up his mind to leave France and take his daughter with him. I do not conceal from you that he took this resolution because he knew that you would be at liberty and would claim your wife. He asked me to see you and tell you all that I have told you. He hoped, and so did I, that this interview would not lead to a meeting which he most particularly wished to avoid, as it might have a very bad effect upon his daughter. But the evil is done. I hope that the poor child will recover from the shock, and it only remains for me to set forth my friend's intentions. He wishes to go to Louisiana, where he owns some land. This amounts to saying that my nephew will never see your wife again. Guy de Bautru will enlist in the First Regiment of the Chasseurs d'Afrique in a few days. Maugars will soon start by the first steamer from Saint Nazaire. He has given up his villa at Vésinet. I expected him to breakfast this morning with his daughter."

"He will probably stay at the Grand Hôtel until he leaves," said Estelan.

"No, sir. He has returned to his rooms near the Place de la Trinité, although they remind him of sad events. Maugars cannot go to useless expense, owing to the rascally conduct of that notary who robbed him of his fortune. But I must tell you that the two hundred thousand francs which constitute your wife's dowry are not lost. They will be restored in ten years from now, for I have guaranteed the payment by a mortgage on my estate in Anjou."

"Enough, sir! Money is not the question. The question is my wife's return to me, and I insist upon it, and I shall claim her, let Monsieur de Maugars do what he may."

"He fears this, and he even fears that you may requisition the assistance of the police to take his daughter from him, and he will not resort to cunning to place her beyond the reach of the law, but he thinks, and so do I, that you will not resort to law."

"If he forces me to do so, I shall. You cannot expect me to bow down to the will of a man who wishes to take my wife from me, after having chosen me as his son-in-law, for he did so, as you well know. I did not intrigue in order to marry Mademoiselle de Maugars. I was not in love with her at the time when he first encouraged me to ask for her hand. I did not even think of marrying at all. And now that he has bestowed his daughter upon me, now that I love her, he expects me to give her up because it suits him to take her to America! Don't for one moment imagine that I shall yield to this old man's whim. It would be cowardice on my part if I gave Madeleine up to him. What would become of her if he carried her across the ocean? Does the selfish old father think that he is going to live for ever? He ought not to think of sacrificing her to his pride."

"Nothing lasts for ever in this world," replied Souscarrière. "Men die and hearts change. Madeleine's heart has changed, and may change again."

"What do you mean, sir?" asked Estelan, eagerly.

"I mean that if I were in your place I should not do as you propose to do—I should not try force to assert a right which no one disputes. Instead of taking up arms against the troubles which fatality has forced upon me, I should blame myself for not communicating with my wife and letting her know that I had survived my fall, and not having written to tell her that I should soon reappear completely cleared from all suspicion."

"But even if I admitted all this, my right to her would remain the same."

"But I should, in your place, not enforce it so strongly. I should say to myself: 'I have injured Mademoiselle de Maugars—unintentionally, it is true, but she has suffered; I was not guilty, nor is she; it is not her fault if she believed herself to be a widow. She is now expiating in sorrow a crime which she did not commit, and the expiation will last a long time, perhaps for ever, for whether I force her to follow me, or whether I leave her to herself, her misfortunes will last all her life. Well, then, I share her expiation, and I will put myself to the test. Instead of assuming the tone of a master I will speak as I once spoke, when I aspired to her love. Why should I not succeed, as then? She has forgotten, but she may remember. The day is perhaps not far off when she may perceive that she was mistaken in turning to another, that true happiness would have been with me; in fact, that she can only be happy as my wife.'"

"In other words," rejoined Estelan, in a sarcastic tone, "you advise me to await my wife's good pleasure and court her to induce her to take me back?"

"It would be more kind and considerate than sending the police after her," replied Souscarrière, quietly. He knew well enough that he had been successful in this appeal to Louis Vallouris' good feeling.

"I am going to anticipate an objection which you may make," he resumed. "You will ask me if it will be necessary for you to cross the sea to try to win Madeleine once more. I cannot answer you now on that point, but I can promise you that you shall see her when she is able to receive you, and that she will answer you herself."

"But her father will dictate her reply."

"No, for he will not be present at the interview."

"You swear to that?"

"I do. I will make Maugars consent, and Madeleine, I am sure, will not refuse. But that is not all. I give you my word of honour that Guy de Bautru shall not see your wife before he leaves for Algeria."

Then as Estelan, who was visibly agitated, made no reply, Souscarrière added: "I remain at your disposal, sir, for I have not forgotten that I have given you offence. You owe me nothing for what I have told you, for I am acting solely in the interest of Maugars and his daughter. We shall fight, that is agreed upon; but we can do so as well in a few days as to-morrow. This evening I will send you the names and addresses of my seconds; I will let you know how your wife is, and I hope to be able to say on what day she will receive you. Meantime, allow me to go and find out in what state she now is." Saying this, Souscarrière bowed coldly to Madeleine's husband and pointed to the door.

Estelan walked towards it and left the room exclaiming: "Remember, sir, I have your word."

Bautru's uncle was a break-neck sort of fellow as a rule, but in this interview he had certainly manœuvred like an experienced diplomatist.

IV.

It was the evening of a very warm day. The setting sun gilded the tops of the tall trees in M. Aubijoux's park. The villa rose up in the light, its window panes glittering in the last rays of the orb of day. All was calm and peaceful about the scene, which seemed created to charm the eyes and rejoice the hearts of those who looked upon it.

Two persons were walking in the park: Jean Aubijoux and Louis Vallouris; two wealthy men to whom heaven had seemingly allotted the real happiness in a world sorrowful to so many. And yet they were now mingling their lamentations and cursing their existence; together blending their complaints against fate, and telling one another of their troubles. Each of them had been stabbed to the heart by the woman he loved.

When Louis Vallouris left the Grand Hôtel, he at once returned to the Boulevard de Montmorency. Where else could he go? He had promised Souscarrière to wait until Madeleine was able to receive him, and he hated the sight of the Paris streets. He knew nothing of the sad events which had caused so much grief to the millionaire, and now heard them for the first time from his lips.

Aubijoux had welcomed him warmly, and the conversation had been animated indeed, for there was so much to tell, so many confidential communications to be made, so much sorrow at last to be revealed to sympathetic ears. The friends had been talking for two hours, and were still reproaching the women who had brought them to such suffering, and planning retaliation upon them. Their reproaches were useless however, their plans were idle. Their minds were too much troubled for them to reason clearly or look courageously upon the situation, and speak with any degree of coolness of the sad necessities imposed upon them.

The merchant, whose sorrows were less recent, had found time to form various plans somewhat more clearly than the younger man, and he was to a certain extent able to advise him. But it was the counsel of anger—for he told him to regulate his conduct by his own.

"Do as I shall do," said he: "kill the man who has stolen your happiness, and leave the woman to remorse. There has been an attempt made to persuade me that Léonie is not guilty of anything more than frivolity and heedlessness, but I cannot forget seeing that Busserolles on his knees before her. I told Girac, who came to me, that if his friend refused to fight with me I would box his ears wherever I met him; and after a long discussion he finally promised that he would send Busserolles' seconds to me. You shall be my second, Estelan, and I will be yours whenever you meet Bautru, to whom I almost owe a debt of gratitude, for, thanks to him, I found out the name of my wife's lover. But as he has attempted to rob you of your wife, I now look upon him as an enemy."

"You forget that I am to fight with his uncle," replied Estelan, who had told Aubijoux all that had occurred at the Grand Hôtel.

"Yes, with that Colonel Souscarrière who has never ceased to accuse you while I was gathering together the proofs of your innocence, and who

now interferes to prevent you from wreaking your just revenge upon his nephew. You would be mad to submit to the law as he wishes to lay it down to you. He must be a slasher, that old soldier, and when he has disabled you, Monsieur de Maugars and his daughter can do as they please. Don't accept a duel which ought not to take place, as it is utterly motiveless and not founded on any serious offence."

"Monsieur Souscarrière had the audacity to lay his hands upon me."

"He seized hold of you, but that is not the same as giving you a blow. Don't pay any attention to his assumed right to come before his nephew. Find Monsieur de Bautru. Insult him. He will fight and you will kill him, if Heaven prove just."

"What then?"

"When he is dead, and when I have chastised his friend Busserolles, we will leave the country for ever, and turn our backs upon this Paris, where any frivolous woman can wrong an honest man, and yet stand well before the world. We will return to Mexico, my dear Estelan, and begin a new life. I will wind up all my business affairs in France. Le Pailleur will help me. Your fortune is intact. You shall be my partner in the beautiful country where we first met, and we shall be able to move the world, so to speak."

"You can forget, then?" said Estelan. "I envy you, for I have not the same courage."

"You will have, my friend. I have suffered like you, hesitated as you hesitate. It seemed to me that I should never be able to tear from my heart the love which has embittered my life. Twenty times already I have been on the point of throwing myself at this woman's feet to entreat her to return. When I went that evening into the house where all things spoke of her, I called upon her name in supplication, and often have I wept there—wept like a child. But your wife has not deceived you, the love you had for her was new-born, and had not become deeply rooted in your heart."

"You are mistaken. I love Madeleine so much that I feel as though I should die if I were for ever parted from her, and I am more unhappy than you, for I have no excuse for revenge. She is not guilty of any wrong, and the man whom she loves has nothing to reproach himself with, for they both believed me to be dead."

"This is what Monsieur Souscarrière has led you to believe. He said the same to me when I called upon him to ask his help in finding my wife's lover, an act of folly I much regret. And this story seemed so strange to me that I placed only partial faith in it."

"It must be true, however. If Madeleine had believed me to be alive, she would not have fainted away at sight of me."

"And your rival's uncle advises you to stand aside? Take my advice; rid yourself of this nephew, and leave the country. Believe me, it would not be advisable to forcibly assert your rights over a woman who does not love you."

"Forcibly? Never! I wish to see her; I must have an explanation which will decide my fate, but I shall not use the right which the law gives me."

"Then, there is nothing to prevent you from going with me?"

"She is going away, also. Her father wishes to take her back to Louisiana, where she was born. Do you know what Monsieur Souscarrière said to me? He swore to me, upon his honour, that Monsieur de Bautru

should not see my wife again, and he added that when Madeleine's passing fancy for him had disappeared, she would see that she had been wrong in so soon forgetting me, and be, perhaps, the first to seek a complete reconciliation. He even tried to preach resignation to me and induce me to try to win her again by patience. He all but declared that I was the only person to blame, and that I ought to try to redeem my errors."

"He is an old soldier, whose audacity is cynicism, and who has no rule of conduct but his own will. He is altogether devoted to his friend, Maugars, and his nephew. In consequence of this he is hostile to you. I knew this long ago. A few days after your marriage, he came here to an entertainment, expressly to speak to me about you, and he undertook to contradict me when I assured him that there was no man more upright than yourself. I must confess that his conduct had inspired me with respect, but not with sympathy. When I foolishly applied to him in my own troubles, he did not disguise his feelings towards you; but he took good care not to speak of his nephew, who is your rival and Busserolles' friend. He declared that the Count de Maugars was the victim of an unknown enemy, who had denounced you to the law in order to be revenged upon him."

"He told me the same thing this morning, and tried to persuade me that I ought to forget everything, and try to find out this enemy."

"Who, perhaps, exists only in his own imagination."

"No," muttered Estelan. "I have certainly been denounced by some one, and more than once, too; it was owing to the last denunciation that I was arrested at the Saint-Lazare Station."

"Do you know whom Monsieur Souscarrière has suspected of all these infamous acts?"

"No."

"That worthy Frédoc."

"Frédoc!" repeated Estelan, trying to recall something that he remembered but vaguely.

"Yes, Frédoc," repeated Aubijoux; "my friend Frédoc; an excellent man whom you met in my private room a short time after you came to Paris. I remember perfectly well introducing you to each other."

"Yes, yes, an old man, is he not?"

"Sixty, and very mild, polite, and pleasing. He was especially gracious to you."

"We spoke of Mexico, did we not?"

"Yes, you told him about your journey to Sonora."

"I remember now; I had forgotten his name, but I have not forgotten his face in the least. I remembered that he listened very kindly, and shook hands with me when we separated. I hardly understand how that very characteristic name of Frédoc passed from my mind, for I saw him two or three times after that day."

"Not at my office."

"No; but at Baron Neufgermain's house. I think, too, that I saw him at the church on my wedding-day."

"That may be; the Neufgermain's, no doubt, sent him an invitation. But you are very slightly acquainted with him."

"Very slightly, indeed."

"And as he doesn't know your father-in-law at all, he has not and cannot have any motive for hating either him or you."

"No, of course not. But Monsieur Souscarrière knows him, it seems."

"Frédoc knows the nephew. They belong to the same club, and through the nephew he has become acquainted with the uncle, but only recently. They met for the first time at a fancy ball given by my wife, to which she also invited that wretch, Bussacrolles. Since then they have met elsewhere, and have been on excellent terms; it was Frédéric who urged me to see this Souscarrière, and I was not a little surprised to hear Souscarrière say that he suspected him."

"Of having denounced me? How absurd!"

"He finally confessed that the idea was ridiculous; but his suspicions had gone very far, for he asked me to show him a letter which Frédéric had written to me. He wished to see whether the handwriting resembled that in which the denunciations were written. And as, of course, there was no resemblance whatever, he admitted that he was utterly wrong. I tell you this, to give you an idea of the light minded disposition of this gentleman who advises you to win your wife's heart back by patience and repentance."

"Which advice I shall not follow," remarked Estelan.

"I hope not. Don't be duped by this brutal soldier, who is so very crafty. Do as I shall do, revenge yourself and then leave the country without troubling yourself with a useless search for this enemy. What do you care about the man who wrote the anonymous letters which the police received? Your innocence has been formally proved and you are free. Let the past go, and think only of the future."

"The future!" replied Madeleine's husband, sorrowfully, "the future is even sadder than the past."

"To me, perhaps, for I am too old to love any more; but you, my friend, are of an age when the heart can open again. Forget that unfortunate girl, and abandon her to her remorse. Time will heal the wound, and in a few years you will cease to give a thought to this woman. It will be as though you had never met her. If Frédéric were here, poor Frédéric whom Monsieur Souscarrière so wrongfully suspected, I think that he would say to you what I do."

"Whatever he might say, I should be pleased to see him. He is your friend, and I retain a pleasant recollection of him. Upon what did the colonel found his suspicions?"

"I do not know—it seems that they were in an avenue in the Bois de Boulogne together, when that unfortunate man who was supposed to be you blew out his brains. It was Frédéric who discovered a letter beside the body, a letter addressed to you, and Souscarrière, perhaps, thought that Frédéric had placed it there."

"With what motive?"

"What can I say to that? Why look for the explanation of a mere supposition?"

"This letter, however, has existed?"

"Certainly, and it was handed to the public prosecutor, who concluded from it that you were dead. The search and suit were then given up. You were not arrested till some time afterwards."

"And upon the strength of a fresh anonymous denunciation."

"Which spoke of you as living, and as making journeys to Vésinet."

"The denouncer must have followed me about, step by step, so to speak. But what did this letter picked up near the body contain?"

"So far as I can remember, from what the commissary said, it contained some advice, apparently given you by a friend. You were informed

that the house where you were concealed was no longer a secure asylum, that it had been pointed out to the police, and that you must leave it immediately if you wished to escape the detectives who were looking for you."

"But that was false. No one attempted to arrest me. If the police had been informed that I was hiding at Le Pailleur's house, the discovery of the corpse and the letter wouldn't have prevented them from making a search."

"The police never knew where you were hiding. They do not know now, for I did not tell them. I did not wish to bring my friend Le Pailleur into the matter. If you had not left your hiding-place, they would never have found you. They did not trouble themselves any more about you. Your certificate of decease was drawn up."

"Still, there was a person who knew that I was alive, and who said nothing, the man who denounced me later on, when it became his interest to give me up. What could this interest have been? Monsieur Souscarrière believes that the wretch acted in this manner so as to deceive my wife and father-in-law, to let my wife have time to become engaged to this fellow Bautru, whom she had formerly loved."

"All this is too complicated to seem likely."

"Perhaps," replied Estelan, thoughtfully, "but it is very strange."

"Besides," resumed Aubijoux, "admitting that these Machiavellian combinations were the work of some enemy of the Count de Maugars, that enemy cannot be Frédoc—first, because he is a gentleman who would rather cut off his hand than write an anonymous letter; secondly, because he has never had anything to do with the Maugars family, and also because he could not guess that in 1870 there had been a warrant out for Louis Vallouris, that is to say, for you. Did he even know that you were named Vallouris?"

"He could not have known it except through you or Prunevaux, the notary."

"He knew Prunevaux, that is true, but he had little to do with him, and he did not respect him. For my own part, I never told him of your change of name. Observe that the informer must have been extremely well acquainted with everything that concerned you. You had scarcely come to Paris when he announced the arrival of a man named Vallouris. This first letter is at the public prosecutor's office, and, I have been told, that it is in the same handwriting as those which followed."

"I do not believe that it came from Monsieur Frédoc, but if it were possible to admit that he was capable of such cowardice, the date of the first information would be no proof in his favour, for I met him at your office in the Boulevard Poissonnière but one or two days after my arrival."

"True, but he knew nothing of your past life. I told him that we had known one another in Mexico; I did not tell him that you came from Marseilles, and he could not have guessed it. You haven't the least southern accent."

Estelan reflected. "I remember," he said, after a pause, "that one night, in Monsieur de Neufgermain's drawing-room, some one spoke of Provence. Monsieur Frédoc was present, and it seems to me that I told him where I was born and passed my youth."

"But you did not tell him that you had been Monsieur Vernègue's clerk."

"No. I only told Monsieur de Maugars of that. I concealed nothing

from him. He cannot reproach me with having deceived him. I could not tell him that I was accused of theft, as I did not know it."

"It was his place to find it out. But, to return to Frédoc, I wish to tell you all that there is to know. We shall go to see him together, and when you have spoken with him you will laugh as I do at Souscarrière's notions. I rely upon him as my second with you, in my duel with Bussierolles. I have not seen him for several days past, as he is ill and obliged to remain at home, but I wrote to him to ask this service of him and I trust that he will not refuse. And when we see him we will consult him. I don't know any one who can give better advice than he can in the great emergencies of life."

"His advice won't give me back my lost happiness," rejoined Estelan, sadly.

"Nor will it console me; but don't you think that in some cases it is pleasant to consult a friend! It seems to me that it is comforting to confide one's sorrows. Now that I have found you again, I don't feel so crushed by misfortune; I suffer less, and I am resolved not to let myself be utterly overwhelmed. If you left me I should, perhaps, lose courage. I rely upon your staying in the chalet, where you have already spent one night under circumstances still more painful than those which now exist."

Estelan made no objection. His best plan was to remain Aubijoux's guest, until the terrible questions upon which his fate depended were all settled. The two friends walked away, side by side, through the magnificent park in which such splendid entertainments had been given. But the master of the princely estate walked with his head bowed down, crushed by the weight of recollections which met him at every turn, under the aged trees, lining the shady walks; for he had boasted when he had said that he had been cured of his misplaced affection. He was gazing upon the gravel for the footprints of his faithless one, and the breeze stirring the leaves again brought back to him the sound of the soft words which her perfidious lips had often uttered near these thickets.

Louis d'Estelan did not attempt to rouse him from his sad thoughts, for he was thinking of Madeleine, and comparing his own sorrows with those of his friend Aubijoux. Madeleine, he said to himself, was the victim of a strange fatality, and perhaps of some diabolical machinations. And, little by little, he allowed himself to believe that Souscarrière was right, and that he ought to wreak revenge upon the man who had wrought all this wrong. Was it not better to punish this wretch rather than M. de Bautru? And did he need to take the extreme measures urged by Aubijoux? To go away without hope of return, and leave his wife to her fate without seeing her again or attempting to win her back to better feelings—why that?

He was in the midst of these perplexing thoughts when the financier, who had been leaning on his arm, ran forward to meet a gentleman whom Estelan would hardly have recognised, if Aubijoux had not exclaimed:

"Frédoc! it is Frédoc who is coming towards us! He could not have come at a better time."

Estelan, greatly surprised, stood back and saw the welcome which Aubijoux gave his friend, from a distance. He remarked that M. Frédoc did not appear pleased at sight of him, and looked as though he were about to go away again. But Aubijoux would not suffer him to do this. He held the old bachelor's hand, and did not mean to let him escape.

"Come, my friend," said he, seizing hold of him, "let me bring you to my dear Estelan, who is now restored to us after all his sad trials. We were speaking of you just now, and intended to go to see you, to consult you. It was Heaven sent you here."

Estelan and Frédoc exchanged a cold bow. Their attitude surprised the worthy Aubijoux, who had little reserve in his demonstrations of friendship, but it was natural enough. Frédoc was not, in point of fact, called upon to make a great show of enthusiasm respecting a man who had but that day left prison, where he had been kept on an accusation of theft. One may believe that a man is innocent who has been released for want of proof, and yet not care to throw one's self into his arms. This *want of proof* explains and justifies the reserve with which perfectly honest people are often treated.

Estelan, also, was right in abstaining from any advances, for he thought too much of his own dignity to expose himself to a rebuff. An innocent man who has been slandered does not make advances to any one, but waits until he is sought for.

Aubijoux soon understood all this, and passed over the delicate point in the situation. Without entering into useless explanations, and without pleading for his favourite who had no need of his defence, as his cause was already gained with the law, Aubijoux spoke of Estelan as a sure friend from whom he had no secrets, and who deserved that M. Frédoc should give him the benefit of his advice.

He led them both to a verandah under which they could sit and enjoy the coolness of the evening, and he resumed the conversation by inquiring as to the health of the old bachelor whose first visit since his illness appeared to be for him.

"I have been very ill," said Frédoc, "and I regretted very much being kept at home by dreadful neuralgia, for I knew that you needed me. But I am quite well again now and quite ready to serve you."

"Thanks," said Aubijoux; "I know that you are devoted to me, but I shall not abuse your friendship. If it is disagreeable to you to talk with the seconds whom Busserolles has chosen, Estelan, will take your place. He will go with my old friend Le Pailleur to represent me."

"You could not make a better choice. Busserolles has no doubt sent you some young fops like himself!"

"I have seen but one of them, Monsieur Girac."

"I know him; he belongs to my club. So does Busserolles. This kind of comradeship would annoy me. You would do as well to put your affair into Monsieur d'Estelan's hands. But tell me, have you seen Monsieur Souscarrière?"

"Yes, and it was through an indiscreet remark made by his nephew while I was calling on him that I found out the name of my wife's lover. But your Souscarrière is a gentleman who does not deserve that you should care for him as you do, and I shall venture to request you not to see him again."

"Oh, we have never been intimate, and I think that our acquaintance is at an end. I told you about him, because, being an old officer, he was well able to regulate the preliminaries of a duel; but I was not aware that Busserolles was your adversary. Busserolles is very intimate with Bautru, and so Bautru's uncle could not take up your cause. When do you fight?"

"Whenever Monsieur Busserolles is able to appear, which will be in a

few days. And if I have the good luck to kill him I shall leave the country before the end of the month."

"For a long time?"

"For ever. I am going to leave France and establish myself in America. You can guess why I have taken this resolution."

"Yes; but it appears to me a very serious one."

"I wish that the sea should roll between me and that degraded woman. I wish that she should remain for ever alone with her disgrace upon her. This is the most severe punishment I can inflict, for every one will desert her, and she will be obliged to live upon a small allowance. She will suffer through her vanity. She will not suffer through her heart, for she has none."

"You are perhaps right," said Frédoc, with a sad expression. "It seems to me, however, that you might live separately without condemning yourself to perpetual exile."

"No, my friend, I love her still, and if I ran the risk of meeting her I might, perhaps, be weak enough to forgive her. Estelan approves of my resolution, and will go away with me."

"What!" exclaimed Frédoc, "is M. d'Estelan going away, also?"

"He has been deceived as well as I have been. His wife has fallen in love with that Monsieur de Bautru. It is said, to excuse her, that she believed herself to be a widow. Her father saw fit to tell her that Estelan was killed at the time when he leaped out of the window; and you know that the police thought that he was dead, for a letter addressed to him was found beside the body of a man who committed suicide in the Bois de Boulogne."

"I found that letter, myself," replied Frédoc, unhesitatingly, "and was deceived, like every one else."

"If I had known what was going on," said Aubijoux, "I should not have concealed from you that Estelan was alive. You would not have told the police, but you might have informed Souscarrière. Unfortunately, I was at Marseilles at the time, and ignorant of all these complications. I had just returned when our friend was arrested. The present situation of affairs is this: The daughter of the Count de Mangars fainted away on seeing her husband appear before her, for she no doubt took him for an apparition. Monsieur Souscarrière declared to Estelan that she loved his nephew, Bautru; that she had intended to marry him; and that, as she could not do so without committing bigamy, she was going to follow her father, who will take her I know not where. The same Souscarrière quietly advised Estelan to accept this arrangement, and tried to convince him that, thanks to these reciprocal concessions, no one could complain."

"Did Estelan consent?"

"No; but he has the choice between two courses: either to renounce his wife, or to bring in the law to compel her to live with him. Estelan hesitates, and has asked my advice."

"May I ask what it was?"

"I was about to tell you, my dear Frédoc, and I feel certain beforehand that you will agree with me. I think it would be wrong for him to appeal to the police to restore him his wife. A gentleman ought not to take such violent measures as those."

"Then you advise him to leave the field free to M. de Bautru?" said Frédoc, quickly.

"No. I have advised him to challenge him and force him to fight."

"That does not settle the question. For, after the duel, whatever may be the result——"

"After the duel, and if, as I hope, our friend is the conqueror, he can go to the Count de Maugars and say to that gentleman and his daughter, 'I might take back my wife; I ought to do so, as I have no reason to spare you; but I prefer to revenge myself by showing you my contempt. Let her go wherever you wish to take her. She cannot marry, as she is not a widow. She is sufficiently punished. I am going away, and you will never see me again.'"

At this conclusion Frédoc made a gesture of surprise, and looked at Estelan, who listened without saying a word. Then, after a moment's silence, the old bachelor asked: "Is this your own view of the matter, sir?"

"I have not come to any decision as yet," replied Madeleine's husband.

"Then, since our friend Aubijoux wishes to know what I think, I will say, frankly, that I think exactly the reverse of what he does."

"What!" exclaimed Aubijoux, "you think that he ought to let this man Bautru alone?"

"Yes, for two reasons; the first is that in this affair Monsieur de Bautru appears to me to be the man who is least to blame; he could not prevent the daughter of the Count de Maugars from loving him. The second is that the result of the duel is very uncertain, and if the fate of arms were contrary to Monsieur d'Estelan, to use plain words, if he were killed, his rival could marry his widow."

"He would not dare to do so. All Paris would attack him."

"People dare do anything when they are in love. Monsieur de Bautru need only leave Paris, and as Monsieur de Maugars, you say, intends going abroad, nothing would be easier. I will add that, if, on the contrary, Monsieur de Bautru fell in an encounter which he was not called upon to accept, public opinion would be against Estelan."

"What does public opinion matter? I don't let it trouble me, and I shall fight with M. de Busserolles without worrying myself as to whether people think favourably of my course or not."

"Your case is quite different, my dear Aubijoux, for everybody knows, or will know, that you have real cause for complaint. But no one knows that Madame d'Estelan loves Guy de Bautru, and a meeting between her husband and that young man would provoke a perfect scandal. Many persons are unaware of the sad error of which Monsieur d'Estelan fell the victim. On the day after the duel, however, all Paris will know that he has been accused, arrested, and spent several days in prison."

"He has no occasion to blush for that, as he has been declared innocent. Besides, the drawback which you speak of is nothing to the sacrifice he would have to make if he left his wife free to receive Monsieur de Bautru."

"I don't think that he ought to do that," said Frédoc.

"What do you advise, then?" asked M. Aubijoux, who was greatly surprised, and did not hide it.

"I am not called upon to advise Monsieur d'Estelan; but, if I were situated as he is, I should not hesitate for a moment to use a right which no one dare dispute. I should summon my wife to follow me, and if she refused, I should employ legal measures."

"That is to say, the police? But, my dear Frédoc, that would set people talking against Estelan, just as you say—and attach so much importance to."

"He would not be obliged to use force. If he threatened to do so that would suffice. To doubt that, a man must be ignorant of a woman's heart. They resist as long as they think they can safely do so. But they give way to a will which is stronger than their own, and do not hold anger against the man who obliges them to obey him, for they only love those who conquer them. To make one's power felt is the only way to please them."

"You have a bad opinion of them, although they have never made you suffer. What would your opinion be if you had married?" asked Aubijoux, smiling sadly.

"My dear sir," said Frédoc, "I am nearly sixty, and some take me for a sage; but I can assure you that my wisdom has cost me dear. It once happened to me, as to many other men, to give my whole soul to a woman I adored. I was very cruelly punished for doing so. I have also been loved by a woman for whom I had no affection. I have acquired the sad conviction that gratitude is not the distinguishing feminine virtue. But I perceive that I am taking you away from the subject, and am philosophising out of time. I should be very grieved if Monsieur d'Estelan thought that I was seeking to influence his resolutions. I have given my opinion because you asked me to do so; I shall not allow myself to ask whether he will follow it."

"If you asked me, sir, I could not answer at present, for I do not yet know what I shall do," replied Estelan, who had listened without a word to the dialogue which concerned him so nearly. "I shall see my wife, and then I shall make up my mind."

"When shall you see her?" inquired M. Aubijoux.

"As soon as she can receive me; to-morrow perhaps. Monsieur Souscarrière promised to send me word."

"I trust that it will be as soon as possible, and that you will adopt my ideas; but you are free, my dear friend, and it seems to me that we have talked of this sad subject enough."

"Too much," said Frédoc. "I will now take my leave of you and Monsieur d'Estelan, but I shall come back one of these days to ask a favour of you."

"Ask it of me now."

"No. Perhaps I shall not need you."

"But at least you can tell me what it is."

"It is a somewhat serious matter which interests me alone, and in which a devoted friend can be of great assistance to me. It has gone on and on, and will soon come to a crisis, but it may be that it will not result in such a way as to compel me to apply to you, and in that case it will be idle to speak of it. I must now leave you; but tell me, can I rely upon you in case of need?"

"Certainly, I would fight for you if it were necessary."

Frédoc rose, pressed the hand which the financier held out to him, did not offer to shake hands with Estelan, who made him a formal bow, and went away, leaning upon M. Aubijoux's arm. The latter accompanied him to the gate, where an open cab was waiting.

"That man is right," thought Madeleine's husband, following him with his eyes. "I wished to be loved, and I have been deceived. Why should I not make myself feared now? She would perhaps return to me. I will try. And if those who undertake to keep her from me find fault with me, I shall have an excellent pretext for quarrelling with them. What a pleasure to give either Souscarrière or Bautru a good sword-thrust!"

"That is a true friend," said Aubijoux, returning and pointing to Frédoc, who was bowing to them from his victoria. "Do you know what he said to me as he drove away? He promised that he would soon discover and let you know the name of the scoundrel who has twice denounced you."

V.

THE offices where an important newspaper is printed are not what frivolous people may think. There are some simple persons who imagine that papers are got up all alone, as it were, and that journalists pass their time in drinking or visiting actresses, and write their articles upon marble tables in cafés, or on rosewood desks in silken boudoirs.

How the steady "family-man" would open his eyes if he could see the hard-working journalists bent double over a proof-sheet or a slip of "copy," at an hour when men who believe themselves to be workers are snoring in their comfortable beds; if he were present when an article is being written amid the noise of coming and going; or if he saw the work of the galley-slaves who do the reporting, and between times cudgel their brains to get ten lines together which are worth printing, and relate to a mad dog, or some such matter as that.

A "daily" is a workshop where ideas ferment, so to speak, from morning until night and from night till morning—a workshop where neither Sunday nor Monday is holiday; and it sometimes happens that the toilers of this workshop die of their daily task.

The journal which Gustave Métel favoured with his precious assistance was considered to be one of the most reliable of the Parisian prints, and it owed much of its superiority to the good-natured young fellow, who, more than once, had done favours to Guy de Bautru and Uncle Sousecarrière.

Gustave Métel was not a mere reporter, nor a theatrical critic, nor a writer on legal subjects, nor a novelist. He had no speciality, but did everything except write about politics, which would have made him dull. A journalist by inclination as well as to earn money, but of good family, and having a fair standing in society, he went about everywhere. He was industrious to a degree, and could write five hours at a stretch on any given subject. He could have written the entire paper alone. He was remarkably steadfast. He came first and left last, and not to go to bed. When did he sleep? No one ever knew. Probably in the country when he was sent there about something concerning the paper.

The day after Frédoc, Estelan, and Aubijoux walked and chatted under the park trees at Autenil, Métel was at his post as usual. It was the afternoon. Seated in front of a desk, and surrounded by four or five comrades, he was opening some telegrams to oblige an absent friend, and was so absorbed in his task that he did not speak. Still he always had an anecdote to tell, and there were plenty present to listen and reply. It needed some urging to get him to chat on this occasion, but at last the efforts of his companions proved successful.

"My dear fellow," said he, "I have heard a good story,"—here he paused to light a cigarette. "You know that Prunevaux the notary made off after squandering a million in less than a year?"

"Of course we do!" exclaimed the sub-editor and a writer of "echoes," who was cudgelling his brain for a final witticism.

"Yes, but you didn't know that the singer whom he took a theatre for had fallen in love—if singers ever do such things—with a Brazilian."

"Rio Tinto! Rio Tinto!" exclaimed several voices. "I have played cards with him!" added another.

"How did you come off?"

"I won six napoleons."

"That is more than you got for the operetta. What will now become of the *Fantaisies Comiques*? Will the Brazilian take care of Prunevaux's venture in his place?"

"He's no such fool. Only honest notaries take theatres to bring out singers from the provinces. Escandecat made off with all that was left of Prunevaux's money."

"That may be called smart, just as a manager should be. He ought to marry old Rosine de Villemoble. That would make a pretty little bit of gossip, and we want bits of gossip."

Métel turned away and set to work again at his telegrams. And, this ended, he took up several letters addressed to him. Three were insulting, and of these, two were badly spelt, four asked for notices, one was an invitation to dine with a young "dramatic artist," and another contained a lengthy compliment as to his last article. It was about the usual thing, and Métel, accustomed to take criticism and praise philosophically, ran quickly enough through this commonplace correspondence. By mere chance he had not yet opened the only letter that interested him.

It was a line from Guy de Bantru, recalling himself to his recollection, and asking him in a friendly strain to keep all allusion to the past or recent misfortunes of the Maugurs family out of his paper. It also thanked him for the service which he had done by keeping out the anonymous letter, and sent the journalist Colonel Souscarrière's compliments.

This short epistle set Métel thinking. Since the supper at Antonia's house he had not seen either the uncle or the nephew. He was quite ignorant of everything concerning them since that memorable night; but he knew that Estelan had been released, and that Rangouze was in prison at Mazas.

The arrest of this individual, a dandy, thief, and usurer all in one, had made less of a stir than might have been supposed. The clubs were deserted at that season of the year, for the greater number of those from whom Rangouze had extorted money were at the seaside. The story had gone about, however, and was being told everywhere, and Métel had been among the first to hear of it. He had also learned that the charge against M. de Maugurs' son-in-law had been declared null and void; but he had taken measures to prevent any comments in the paper on the subject.

Without being Bantru's intimate friend, Métel liked him very much, and he was a great admirer of "Uncle Souscarrière." He greatly enjoyed the old soldier's sallies and original remarks. He studied him as a naturalist studies a rare specimen, and he had a plan in his head to bring him some night to the newspaper office and to present this survivor of a vanished period to all the reporters and other writers of the staff. So he wished to be agreeable to both the uncle and the nephew, but Bantru's letter somewhat embarrassed him.

"'Not let anything get in' is very easily said," he thought, "but if this young gentleman imagines that it is as easily done, he is vastly mistaken. I have had trouble enough as it is to keep out the story about Rangouze. Twenty-two francs and fifty centimes that a reporter gave up

earning to please me. This kind of thing can't go on. My editor will make objections. When Rangouze's trial comes off we shall be obliged to speak about it, and it is clear enough, that at that moment the Maugars, father, daughter, and son-in-law, will be brought before the public and talked about. I can't prevent it. And as regards this fellow Estelan's release from prison, I can't imagine why these people don't wish that it should be mentioned. It clears him entirely. I know that it will revive the recollection of his wedding, which came to such a bad end. But how can that be helped?"

While Métel was meditating upon this knotty point, the anonymous letter which he had received on the night of the wedding, returned to his mind; the letter which he had shown to Guy de Bautre and handed to him at the Jardin Mabille.

"I see!" he said to himself, "Bautre is afraid that we shall be bombarded with anonymous letters as well as the other papers, and that they will contain slanderous statements as regards his friends. His request does not apply to what all the press will take up in good faith. He is only afraid of anonymous comments. He may rest easy on that score, for I will put a stop to anything of the kind. But I don't understand how this Monsieur de Maugars has made so many enemies, of whose hatred he is now reaping the bitter fruit. They are certainly good haters. The anonymous letter that we received did not seem to be of much importance at a first glance, but it was deep-dyed rascality all the same."

"Métel," called out the "echo" writer, who was working at the other end of the table, "where is your friend Busserolles? Has he got over the bullet he received from Aubijoux, the nabob?"

"It has been extracted. He can have it put on a scarf-pin."

"What has become of the nabob's wife, who used to give such fine balls?"

"She is living in the Marais, in the Rue du Roi Doré, at her father's house. He isn't gilded—*doré*—like the street, or rather its name. Her husband says that he will never look at her again, and will only allow her six thousand francs a year. Now don't go making an 'echo' out of what I am telling you! No nonsense of that sort, mind! Don't trespass on the 'sacred ground of private life,' ahem!"

"Is it true that Monsieur Aubijoux is going to fight a duel with his wife's lover?" asked the sub-editor.

"So they say. There is a duel now being arranged. Don't neglect mentioning that."

This desultory dialogue was interrupted by the entrance of a lad belonging to the office, who brought in a letter.

"Another!" exclaimed Métel. "What can it be?"

"It is addressed to the boss, but he won't be here for a couple of hours," said the boy, "and he told me yesterday to hand you everything that came for him."

"Very well. Give it to me. I half fancy I have seen this writing before. Each of the letters is at least ten inches long."

"A woman brought it just now. I was at the door, and she asked me where the newspaper letter-box was. I told her that I would take up the letter myself."

"A woman? I'll bet she was a cook!"

"Why don't you read, instead of talking?" asked one of the reporters, whom the chatter prevented from thinking.

Whistling an air which he had lately heard at the Café des Ambassadeurs Métel opened the letter and began to read it, from a sense of duty, for he felt quite sure that it was only fit to throw in the waste-paper basket.

But scarcely had he begun to peruse it than he changed countenance, and stopped whistling. He read rapidly to the end, and then, hastily rising, he called out to the office-boy, who was going away without closing the door: "Jeandel!"

"Sir?"

"You say that this woman was down stairs just now?"

"She may still be there, and she cannot be far off. I came straight upstairs and brought the letter at once. We shall soon see," added the boy, running to the window which opened upon a balcony. Métel followed him hastily.

"There she is, sir! There on the sidewalk across the way, in front of that china shop."

"The stout woman in black, is that she?"

"Yes. I'll call her, if you like."

"No. I will go myself," said the journalist, catching up his hat and cane, and a moment later he was in the street. The woman had walked on, but he saw her just as she turned round the first corner.

"Ah!" said Métel to himself, "this time I think that I shall discover the hidden enemy who is persecuting Bautru's friends. The letter is in the same writing as that addressed to the paper on the night of the wedding, and the note for insertion inclosed in it is as malicious as the first one that was sent. But I did not imagine that the enemy belonged to the sex to which Rangouze owes his mother."

He hastened on, while thus reflecting, making every effort to overtake the woman who had just turned the corner. The office-boy signed to him from the window that he was following the right person, and so as he ran no risk of making a mistake, he set off eagerly after her.

When he passed the last house at the end of the street, he again espied the woman quietly walking along the Rue de Provence. He had only to take a few long strides to catch up with her, and he was making ready to accost her, when a wise impulse restrained him.

"If I speak to her without being prepared, she may tell me that she does not know what I want with her. Any bad act can be denied. I might vainly assert that she had just given a letter to Jeandel. She would say that I have taken her for some one else, for she must have excellent reasons for remaining *incognita*. How shall I prove that she is telling a falsehood if she answers me like that? I can't force her to go with me before magistrate, so that the handwriting may be verified. And yet I don't want to lose this chance of doing a service to Bautru. What shall I do?"

Then, after taking a moment, and keeping at a short distance from the woman, Métel added: "I will simply follow her without speaking to her. I will go wherever she goes. She will end by returning home, and when once I know where she lives, everything else will go of itself. Her doorkeeper can be bribed. He will tell me who she is. I will inform Bautru, and he can make his own arrangements. After all, the private affairs of Monsieur de Maugars don't concern me."

With this conclusion, Métel began to act as he had resolved. He followed the woman ten paces off, and began to examine her dress and

person. She was simply but very neatly clad in a black merino jacket, somewhat heavy for the season, and wore a black straw hat and low-heeled boots. It was the plain attire of a middle-class woman going to shop in the neighbourhood of her own house. Her figure was heavy and inelegant, but she did not look like a working-woman. She walked in a leisurely manner; but she did not stop before the shops or turn to look at the passers-by.

Métel wished to see her face, but he did not venture to stare at her, for he did not care that she should see him. Accordingly he resorted to the well-known manœuvre of all idlers who follow women in the streets. He crossed over, took the opposite side of the way, and walked on fast, so as to get somewhat ahead of the woman, and then from the corner of his eye he examined her from head to foot.

If he had been following her from motives of gallantry he would now have been utterly discouraged, for the woman was by no means young, being fifty, at least, and her hair was growing very grey. Her face was worn and wrinkled, and her complexion very dark. She carried a satchel in one hand and had a shawl on her arm. She was not attractive now, and yet plainly enough she had been pretty when young. Her features were somewhat marked, although regular, and her eyes were still bright.

They now met those of the journalist, but turned away at once. She evidently did not know Métel, and did not suspect that he was *tracking her*, as the police would have phrased it.

"Why on earth has this respectable grandmother such a hatred of the Count de Maugars," thought Métel. "It is against him that she has a spite. I can't doubt that after reading the amiable note which she wishes us to insert. It contains no mention of the son-in-law, except a slight one, and, besides, d'Estelan's story is well known to everybody. Most stress is laid upon the disagreeable position of Mademoiselle de Maugars, who thought that she was well rid of her husband. She writes well, whoever she is, this woman; she uses choice language, and does not require too many words to express her meaning. I wonder whether—it would seem too absurd!—whether Monsieur de Maugars ever made love to her and deserted her when she was young? Such things happen every day. Some jealous women use vitriol, or a revolver. This one prefers anonymous letters."

The woman who was thus being speculated upon walked along quietly enough, and her mild and modest air would never have led a stranger to suppose that she was engaged in an underhand affair. She passed along in the shadow of the houses without turning or stopping. She crossed the Rue de la Chaussée d'Antin, and went towards the least frequented portion of the Rue de Provence, at that end formerly called the Rue Saint-Nicholas d'Antin. Amid the handsomer houses there are some little squat buildings on either side, dingy shops, second-class hotels, and dark alleys.

Métel, who kept on at the same pace with the woman, without leaving the left side of the street, saw that she was beginning to look about her, and to read the numbers of the houses and examine the shops.

"Good!" he muttered, "she must live somewhere about here, and I shall not have to keep after her much longer. I'm not sorry, for it's very warm. She must be a spiteful creature, indeed, to go out in this dog-day heat to carry her wicked letters to the public papers."

He had scarcely finished this short soliloquy when the woman turned

into a courtyard opening upon the street, a poor-looking place, filled with hand-carts, boards, and empty barrels, the yard of a tumble-down building which was certainly no millionaire's abode.

"If she lives there," thought Métel, "she must be in need, and I can imagine that she hasn't any cordial feelings towards the gentleman who is perhaps the cause of her poverty. Let's see where she is going!—she turns to the right, and disappears behind a pyramid of barrels. Ah! good! now is the time to talk to the doorkeeper."

He advanced noiselessly, looking about him for the doorkeeper's lodging.

"Ah! this is too bad!" he exclaimed, "the old shanty has no doorkeeper. That will make it hard for me to find out anything. Whom can I question? Bah! the first person I meet at the door—there must be a staircase. Houses may not have doorkeepers, but they must have staircases."

He was thus talking to himself when some one touched him on the shoulder.

He turned quickly round, and found himself face to face with Girac, who looked at him with a mocking expression, and said to him, with a laugh: "What are you doing here, my dear fellow?"

"Nothing," stammered Métel, greatly annoyed by this meeting.

"You make mysteries with your friends? Well, that's stupid! I'll bet that you are after some woman."

"Yes, a woman who has been assassinated by her lover, so we were informed at the office. The editor told me to find out all about it."

"Very good! I take your story for what it is worth. But, speaking of lovers, did you know that Buserrolles has a duel on hand for to-morrow, and that I'm his second? Bautru refused without giving any reason."

"I know all that. Good-bye! I must leave you and go after the information I am in quest of."

"In this ugly house?"

"Yes—no—I don't think that this is the place."

Métel had just seen the woman reappear in the courtyard and return towards the street.

She passed by without observing him, and began to walk on as slowly as before, and in the same direction.

"Are you going to look anywhere else?" asked Girac. "I have a great mind to go with you. I have nothing in the world to do, and it would amuse me to look into the matter of a love-drama, an assassination, and all that sort of thing."

"No, no" said Métel, "you would be very much in my way, my dear fellow! I am in a great hurry, and must leave you."

He did so, to the great disgust of Girac, who thus lost a good chance of roaming about, and to deprive him of all desire to follow him, Métel plunged into a court in the Rue Caumartin.

The woman was in his rear. He waited in the court until he saw her go towards the Rue du Havre. Girac was discouraged, and did not reappear, so the journalist began his pursuit once more.

He was beginning to fear that it would take him much further than he had at first imagined, and he said to himself that Bautru and his uncle would owe him eternal gratitude for the unpleasant task which he was fulfilling solely to be agreeable to them.

The woman now went up the Rue du Havre and stopped to buy a melon from one of the provision dealers who have their shops in front of the western railway station.

"She must be some simple soul," thought Métel, "who has gone out to buy her provisions and settle her accounts. She probably gave an order to some cooper or other in the Rue de Provence, and now she is going to buy her dinner. Who would expect such blackness in a housekeeping old soul? It is incredible! I hope that she doesn't intend to take the train and go into the country. I shan't follow her if she does."

While thus reflecting, he pretended, so as to conceal his purpose, to be examining some illustrated journals displayed in the windows of a newspaper kiosk. The woman spent some time in bargaining. All at once some one asked the woman of the kiosk for an evening paper, and Métel at once recognised the speaker's deep bass voice.

"Is that you, colonel?" he exclaimed. "You can't imagine how glad I am to see you."

"I am more glad than you are," replied Souscarrière, offering the journalist his hand. "I have just come from Vénét, and I am now going to see my friend Maugars on the Place de la Trinité."

"I wish to say something to you about Monsieur de Maugars."

"Indeed! What have you to tell me?"

"Read, but read quickly. I will tell you what is going on."

Without losing sight of the woman, Métel drew the anonymous letter from his pocket, and handed it to Souscarrière, who took it with some hesitation, for he did not understand the journalist's air of mystery. But scarcely had he cast his eyes over the letter when he exclaimed: "Thunder and Mars! I know that writing!"

"So do I. Go on, colonel, read it all."

"'People are talking about a singular adventure which will be the news of the day, to-morrow,' read Souscarrière, in a low tone. 'A husband, who has just been released from Mazas prison, which he visited against his will, found his place occupied when he came home. His wife, who believed him to be dead, had already consoled herself so well that she was thinking of marrying again. She has given up this plan, at least until divorces can be obtained,* but she positively refuses to return to the conjugal abode, and no one knows what her lord and master will do to bring her back. There is a rumour that he will employ the police. This will be very entertaining to the people in the neighbourhood, where a new church has lately been built. The most amusing point in this family comedy is that the married couple have not met since their wedding-day, for the husband thought fit to disappear immediately after swearing fidelity to his wife at the foot of the altar. His disappearance caused a little stir a month ago, and the scandal which is now about to break forth will cause even more of a sensation, for the interested parties move in the best society. Perhaps the lady will go off with her lover. It is said that they are going to foreign parts. If the legitimate husband wishes to use his rights, he had better make haste.'"

"This is infamous!" exclaimed Souscarrière, pale with rage. "Where did this letter come from?"

"It was brought to our office, just like the other was—the one which gave to your nephew. Monsieur de Maugars and his family are evidently neant, although no names are given; but I can't imagine what can have given rise to this fresh slander. However, this time the slanderer will not escape the punishment she so richly deserves."

* At the time this story was written the divorce law had not been passed in France.

"What! do you know her? Is it a woman, then?"

"I don't know her yet, but I am after her. You see that woman who is paying for a melon which she has just bought—over there? in front of us?"

"Yes. Well?"

"It was she who came to drop this letter into the box at our office, but was fool enough to hand it to our boy."

"What?" exclaimed Souscarrière, "that old woman who looks like a retired huckster—it is she?"

"Yes," replied Métel. "Fortunately, I was at the office when she brought the letter. I read this ignoble trash, and then rushed to the window. She was still in the street. The boy pointed her out to me, and I immediately started after her. I have been thirty-five minutes after her now. I am really not sorry that you have come to relieve me, for I have some work to do at the office and ought to go there. But you have no time to lose. She is going off."

"I shall stop her, and tell her what I think of her."

"Don't do that, colonel! She would deny everything, but if you keep after her you can find out where she lives, for she is evidently going home. She cannot walk much farther with so much to carry. The melon she has with her weighs at least ten pounds. See! she is crossing the street now. Be careful, or you will lose sight of her among the vehicles that are going backwards and forwards."

"I have good eyes and can follow anybody. I am a good huntsman. Have you another quarter of an hour to spare?"

"If it will oblige you, yes."

"Well, then, follow with me. I have a great many things to ask you. You will let me keep the letter, won't you?"

"I should have sent it to your nephew if I had not had the good luck to meet you."

"Thanks! You are doing me a service which I shall never forget in my life. I am quite reconciled to journalism. Come!"

The woman with the melon had crossed to the opposite side of the street, in front of the restaurant where Souscarrière and Maugars had dined together, and she now seemed making for the Rue de Béotie. Métel and Bautre's uncle crossed over after she had done so, and followed her ten paces in the rear.

"What do you think of this precious epistle?" asked Souscarrière, as he placed the anonymous letter in his pocket.

"I confess that I can't understand it. I guessed that it related to Monsieur de Maugars and his son-in-law, and our readers would have guessed that also, if we had published it. I need not say that we shall not do so, as I have just handed it to you. The allusion to the marriage and the newly-built church makes it all clear enough. But the letter mentions facts which I was entirely ignorant of. The husband obliged to send the police after his wife, and all that——"

"It is quite false, sir," said Souscarrière, angrily, and unwilling to tell the private troubles of the Maugars family even to a friend.

"I thought so. But it is to be hoped that these rascally inventions won't reach the public ear. You know what Basile said: 'Calumniate, calumniate!—there is always a sting left behind.'"

"Yes, yes—but I hope to end matters with the traducer to-day. If I can find him, thanks to you, I will wring his neck."

"I shan't blame you, colonel. But if it should prove to be a woman, what then?"

"Do you really imagine that this staid old housekeeper in front of us ever knew Monsieur de Maugars?"

"She may have known Monsieur d'Estelan. Besides, she was not always old and wrinkled. Who knows whether Monsieur de Maugars may not have had a love-affair with her long ago, one of those affairs that are lightly entered into and as lightly broken off?"

Souscarrière started. He remembered the declaration of war sent by the enemy, and wondered if the deceived husband had become reconciled with his wife, and was now pursuing her seducer with her countenance and help.

"It is very unlikely," he thought, "but not impossible. Anything may happen in Paris. There are households in which man and wife are confederates in persecuting the wife's lover. This stout old woman who is rolling along on the sidewalk, like a duck on a country pathway, may have been one of the women whom Maugars knew when he was young. She is ugly, this Ariadne, but women change terribly at times. Old Rosine, who has a spite against me, was pretty enough in the days when we called her 'Leather Helmet.'"

"You will soon know what to think," resumed Métel, "for you will track the game home, that is easy to see. When you run her to earth I should advise you to interview the doorkeeper. If you set about it in the right way you will know all that you wish to find out about the correspondent who buys melons and furnishes the papers with scandal, 'gratis.' Aha! she is turning to the right—she is approaching the omnibus station—she is, perhaps, going to take the tramway—no, by good luck, she is off now and going up the Rue de Rome!"

The name of this street startled Souscarrière. He remembered that Estelan had lived there. But he had no time for fresh suppositions, for the unknown woman in black was already climbing the Rue du Rocher, a steep, winding, troublesome street lined by some extremely ugly houses. Métel did not care to go on to Batignolles, and he was about to ask his companion to let him off, when the woman, who had been a little ahead, stopped before a cobbler's shop standing between the premises of a fruiterer and an ironmonger.

"Oho!" exclaimed the journalist, "is she going to have her boots re-soled? That will keep you here for an hour. Let's see! She's talking to the cobbler. I wonder what she is saying. Ah! there are some children coming out of the shop, two, three, four of them. It puts one in mind of 'the old woman who lived in a shoe,'—they have surrounded the very female whom we are pursuing, and she is searching for something in her bag. There, she is going to give them some silver! That's for their papa, the cobbler. He has taken it and is leaning out of his hole to thank her. Any one would think that the worthy soul had been doing an act of charity. I have an idea, colonel! Why not ask that fellow something about this woman when she goes away?"

"I shall do so," replied Souscarrière. "Now, my dear sir, I must not take any further advantage of your good nature. I wanted you to accompany me in order to ask your advice. You tell me that the paper will say nothing about the matter, and that is enough. I must do what remains to be done by myself."

"I don't see that I can be of any further service to you when the

moment for explanation comes. Perhaps I should even be in your way. I shall return to my telegrams, and I beg you to rely upon my absolute secrecy."

After shaking hands with Souscarrière, in the most cordial manner, Métel hastened back to his office. The worthy young man was very proud and happy to have rendered a service to Bautru's uncle, and to prove to him that a Parisian "newspaper man" may have his good points. He had not done a favour to an ungrateful man, for Souscarrière, who did not profess to like journalists, mentally swore to prove his gratitude by offering him his friendship, the friendship of an old officer who was always ready to do anything in the world for his friends, either with his purse or his sword.

But he soon began thinking of other matters. The woman in black had left the cobbler and was slowly ascending the street. Souscarrière did not allow her to distance him, for he flattered himself that he was now about to discover the author of the anonymous letters, the wretch whose manœuvres had reduced Madeleine and her father to despair.

Whether the fat woman trotting along a few yards ahead of him had played the traitor's part in this drama, or simply that of an agent, Souscarrière was none the less sure that he had reached the final point. The woman knew the secret; she could not keep it from him or escape him. He no longer doubted his own power to make her speak, and he was saying to himself: "Come now, my fine fellow, you must be calm! try not to make a mess of this business. You must manœuvre skilfully and make an able charge, and that will be the end of the matter."

The cobbler's shop was near the entrance of the Rue du Rocher, and the unknown female was still climbing that highly respectable thoroughfare. She had passed the Rue de Laborde, and did not seem aware that she had been followed for the last three quarters of an hour. Métel had walked along very prudently, and Souscarrière manœuvred like some old bloodhound.

He went along with his head up and a cigar in his mouth, seemingly looking at the flies as they flew about, and twirling his cane like a drum-major. His high figure and the red ribbon of the Legion of Honour in his button hole completed the resemblance. When he reached the cobbler's shop, the woman with the melon was well in sight, four houses further on.

Souscarrière stopped short, and assuming his most affable expression, he said to the cobbler: "Good afternoon, my good man. Do you know that lady up there?"

The cobbler raised his head, looked at the individual, who was questioning him, from head to foot, and replied with a surly air: "Of course I do. She is one of my customers."

"You can tell me her name, then?" said Souscarrière, putting his hand in his pocket.

The shoemaker shrugged his shoulders, made a significant grimace, and grumbled out: "Look here! do you take me for one of those fellows?"

"What fellows?"

"Why, detectives. Don't pretend to be smarter than you are; go and ask your questions at the station-house. I don't belong to that sort of thing, you see, not I!"

Souscarrière saw that the cobbler took him for a detective.

"The lady? Do you mean the good lady, who is so kind to all poor little children?" asked one of the shoemaker's progeny, who was looking

admiringly at the old soldier's tall figure. "Hold your tongue, you bad child!" called out the urchin's father.

Souscarrière had a great desire to chastise the insolent artist in shoe leather, but the woman whom he still kept his eye upon suddenly turned the corner of a street on the left hand side and disappeared.

"It won't do for me to become excited," he said to himself, controlling his anger, and setting his hat firmly on his head he took a few strides with his long legs, so as to come up with the object of his pursuit.

He saw too late that he had made a mistake in stopping to question the cobbler. He had forgotten that these men, like many others of the lower classes, think of nothing but the police from morning till night, and imagine that detectives all have long moustaches, a stick in their hands, a hat cocked over one ear, and a red ribbon in their buttonhole. Now, this was, unfortunately, very much like the ex-colonel of the territorial forces.

To repair his mistake he began to run, and, on reaching the corner which the unknown woman had turned, he had the inexpressible satisfaction of seeing her waddling to and fro on the right hand sidewalk.

It is needless to say that he hurried on without taking time to read the name of the street. He even hurried too much, for the woman, on hearing him, turned round; but she did not stop.

"All right! she never saw me before, so I can keep on," thought Souscarrière. "She does not mistrust me, and I can go ahead."

As he was thus congratulating himself, the woman with the melon stopped before an open door, and went in.

"Here we are! I have her now!" muttered Souscarrière.

The door was a spacious carriage-way, and the appearance of the whole house was good. If the woman lived here she had no reason to complain of her lodging. Souscarrière did not hesitate to enter twenty seconds after her, and reached a large vestibule just as she was going up the stairs. The well-waxed stairs were quite as lustrous as mirrors. The door-keeper's lodging looked like a drawing-room, but there was no one there, and Souscarrière did not stop to look for anybody. His conversation with the cobbler had deprived him of all desire to question any one. It seemed to him much more simple and sensible to go upstairs behind the unknown woman, see what floor she stopped at, and act accordingly. The time for being cautious had gone by. Souscarrière had a decisive proof in his pocket, and wished to bring matters to an issue.

The stout woman stopped on the landing of the second floor. Souscarrière, who was ten steps lower down on the staircase, heard a key grate in a door, which opened and was then closed again.

"She must live here," he said to himself, "as she has a key to the rooms. Now she cannot escape me, and must explain. It will be amusing."

He went up with a single stride. It was impossible to be mistaken as to the door. In fact, there was only one on each floor of the house.

Souscarrière rang, the door opened, and the stout woman appeared. She had barely had time to place her melon on one of the benches in the ante-room.

The old soldier was trying to think of something to say, for he did not care to have the matter out on the landing, but she did not give him time to speak.

"He must be at home," she remarked; "I will ask if he can see you."

Souscarrière stood aghast; the fat woman, was evidently only a servant.

"Will you tell me your name?" she said.

Souscarrière hesitated a moment, and then handed her his card, which she took, after asking him to come in. Then she offered him a hall chair, closed the door, and vanished down a long passage which led to her master's room.

"This is amazing!" said the colonel to himself. "She showed no surprise or fear. She probably does not know that I have been following her, and receives me as though I were a friend of her master's. I hope that she won't say that he is out. That would be too bad, for it is he I wish to see. The woman with the melon is only his messenger. What I want to know is whether her master is in or not. I ought not to have handed in my card. If he does not know my name he won't care to see a stranger, and if he does know it he will certainly not receive me, for everybody is aware that I am Maugars' intimate friend."

His reflections were interrupted by the return of the housekeeper, who said to him, in the pleasantest manner imaginable: "He is at home, sir."

Souscarrière was tempted to ask what his name was, but he checked himself in time, and allowed the woman to conduct him into a drawing room, where she left him alone. The apartment was somewhat richly furnished, but it had a stiff and formal aspect. It did not look as though it were much frequented, for the arm-chairs had linen covers, and the clock was not going. The aspect of the room put one in mind of some provincial abode. There was not a single object of art, or anything that enabled one to guess the tastes or the standing of the person living there.

"This man cannot be a Parisian," thought Souscarrière. "In Anjou, even at my lawyer's house, there are more ornamental pieces of furniture than there are here. And this man must be either a bachelor or a widower. If there were a woman here the room would have some appearance of being inhabited. However, all this agrees with the ideas I should have formed of Maugars' persecutor."

The owner of La Bretèche was thus pondering when the door opened and he saw M. Frédoc enter the room and come towards him. Souscarrière was so completely taken aback that he staggered and said not a word.

"Good morning, sir," began Frédoc, who was quite unembarrassed; "I did not know that I should have the honour of seeing you to-day. But you are welcome, whatever brings you."

"These are your rooms, then?" stammered Souscarrière.

"Yes. Did you not know that? I thought that I told you I lived in the Rue de la Bienfaisance."

"Yes, yes, and I must apologise for not having called before. I have started out several times to call and thank you for the interest that you have shown my nephew, and each time I have been prevented by some serious affair or by unforeseen occurrences."

"I do not deserve any thanks, sir, and I don't suppose that you have taken the trouble to call to-day simply to thank me. But may I ask how it was that you happened to come here as you did not know that I lived here?"

Souscarrière had scarcely remarked that Frédoc had not offered him his hand, and that his manner was colder than usual; or, if he had remarked it, he attributed the change of manner to his own neglect, and thought that Frédoc must have thought it strange that he had not taken the

trouble to call after the occurrences which, for a time, had brought them so closely together. And Souscarrière, feeling certain that Frédéric had not written the anonymous letters, for they were not in his handwriting—as he had seen by the epistle addressed to Aubijoux—now returned to the idea which Métel had suggested to him in the street, and said to himself :

“It is that woman who has done the whole thing conjointly with her husband or her lover ; she is in Frédéric’s employ, but he has nothing to do with her bad acts. However, as he necessarily has authority over her, he will help me to make her confess everything.”

“Did you come here without knowing that I lived here?” asked Frédéric, with a mocking look.

“Yes, I did. I remembered your address, but when I entered the Rue de la Bienfaisance, I did not look at the plate at the corner, so that I did not know where I was.”

“But you came upon the very house where I live. That is strange ! Then, when you sent in your card, you thought that you were calling upon some other person than myself ?”

“I thought I was sending it to no matter whom ?” replied Souscarrière, laughing. “You do not understand me, but I will explain myself, for we might go on talking to no purpose if I did not tell you my strange adventure. I was following a woman whom I met on the Place du Havre ; I had been following her without knowing that she lived with you. She is in your service, as she came to open the door of your rooms.”

“Brigitte !” exclaimed Frédéric.

“Is her name Brigitte ?”

“Yes. She is my only servant ; she is fifty-five years old, and I do not believe that she has ever been followed before. Her face and figure are not attractive enough for that.”

“It was not her beauty that made me keep at her heels.”

“What was it, then ?”

“Before I reply, allow me to ask you if she has been long in your service.”

“Ever since she was born. She grew up in my father’s house, and was brought up there. She is the daughter of a man-servant who remained with him till he died. She came to me soon after and has always remained with me.”

“She is not married ?”

“No, she has never been married.”

“That is very strange ! But are you sure of her ?”

“As to what ?”

“Her moral character ?”

“If you asked the people about here that question, they would tell you that Brigitte was their providence. All the poor know and bless her. She has deserved the *Prix Montyon** a thousand times over. If you had noticed her long, you would have seen her in the exercise of her functions, for she never goes out without calling at some poor person’s house to distribute alms.”

“I thought that she gave some money to a poor cobbler in the Rue du Rocher,” said Souscarrière.

* A prize of virtue founded by M. de Montyon, and awarded every year to some deserving person by the French Academy.—TRANS.

"Now, sir," resumed Frédoc, "will you be kind enough to explain the reason of these questions?"

"I will, my dear sir. I should have begun by that, but I am obliged to go further back to make myself understood. You are aware of the troubles which have come upon Monsieur de Maugars?"

"Ah! then this concerns him?"

"Yes. You remember that we talked on the subject together one day, when a circumstance, which you cannot have forgotten, occurred in the Bois de Boulogne."

"I remember that."

"Do you know that Prunevaux has run away, taking Maugars' whole fortune with him? Do you know that Estelan, whom we thought dead, has reappeared, is declared innocent, and has been set free?"

"Monsieur Aubijoux told me yesterday of the result of this painful affair. As for Prunevaux's flight, everybody knows about that."

"You also know that anonymous letters have played a great part in all this matter. Monsieur de Maugars' son-in-law was three times denounced to the police: once when he came to Paris; a second time on his wedding-day; and then again, last week, when he was arrested at the Western railway station. And all these letters were written by the same person—the person who wrote the letter which you found near the dead body."

"I know all that."

"The informer, you must naturally suppose is some very bitter enemy of Monsieur de Maugars or Estelan?"

"That is very likely."

"It is certain. We have a proof of it. The enemy has unmasked himself; we now know against whom he was acting. He only attacked Estelan to injure Maugars."

"Then you know now who this enemy is?"

"No, although he has declared that he intends to make himself known. I do not believe in this promise. The man has always worked in the dark, and he will continue in the same underhanded way unless I settle the matter. He has written a letter—anonymous like all the rest—in which he declares that in directing all this abominable persecution he has revenged himself upon Maugars for having misled and abducted his wife some twenty years ago. I should never have believed it."

"Husbands sometimes succeed in getting the better of those who wrong them," replied Frédoc, coldly.

"Maugars showed me this letter. It was drawn up in a melodramatic style, and breathed ferocious hatred. There was a dagger's thrust in every word. I naturally asked Maugars if he could guess who had sent him this vitriolic epistle, and I begged him to search his memory. He told me that he had formerly carried off the wife of a man named Yvrande."

"Ah! he told you the name, then?"

"Yes. But he never knew what became of this man."

"That does not matter. He has been severely punished for what he did. Now, sir, will you be kind enough to return to the subject of my housekeeper? I do not yet see what it is that connects Brigitte with the family misfortunes of your friend, and I wish that you would explain the matter."

"I am coming to that. Maugars and I have long been looking for the author of these infamous letters, but we could not find out who it was."

We have even suspected very innocent people. We actually suspected you. Your discovery in the Bois seemed to us to be suspicious. I even asked Monsieur Aubijoux to show me a letter in your handwriting. I wished to see whether your writing resembled that of the epistle which you found lying beside the dead man who was supposed to be Estelan. It was absurd, I admit, and I assure you that I no longer entertain such an idea."

"You still say nothing about my housekeeper?" replied Frédoc, without showing any surprise at these remarks, although they were seemingly of a nature to startle him greatly.

"I am coming to that. Do you know Monsieur Métel?"

"Yes as I know a hundred others whom I meet in the streets of Paris every day."

"I know him still less than you do, but my nephew has often met him and likes him very much. Monsieur Métel behaved very kindly under circumstances which concerned us all. At the beginning of Estelan's sad affair he prevented the insertion of an article in his paper which——"

"I know all that. Your nephew told me about it."

"Well, then, a fresh article has been taken to the paper; a letter most maliciously written, like the first one, and speaking of all the private sorrows of the Maugars family. Monsieur Métel was at the office, when a boy employed on the paper brought him this letter which had just been handed to him by a woman. Monsieur Métel read the letter. He knew that we were all interested in finding out its author, and he set out in pursuit of the woman who had not had time to get away."

"That was a good idea of Métel's," said Frédoc, with a singular smile.

"He did not like to accost her in the street, but he followed her. While doing so, he met me on the Place du Havre, and told me the story, and I offered to carry on the pursuit; he accepted, and I followed the woman to your door. She went in. I rang, and you know now why I was so astonished at seeing you. But all this is providential. As you are on our side, your housekeeper is most probably only the unconscious agent of the enemy who is persecuting us. It will be enough for you to question her for us to find out the name of the rascal whom I am longing to strangle."

"It is useless to question Brigitte. I am the man whom you are looking for."

"This is some jest!" exclaimed Souscarrière, stepping back; "you must allow me to say that it is very ill-timed."

"I have no desire to jest at the present moment," replied Frédoc.

"The enemy who revenged himself upon Monsieur de Maugars is myself, I repeat it; I also changed my name like Estelan. I am Yvrande, not Frédoc."

Souscarrière was naturally one of the most irascible and violent of men, but he heard these words without any outburst of rage. He had always liked Frédoc; he esteemed him and treated him as a welcome companion, and he felt at his heart that pang which a true man always feels when the shame of a friend is brought home.

"Then," said he, in a husky tone, "it was you who to revenge yourself stooped to the use of such means as these, and you dare to confess it to me, to take me for a confidant?"

"When you came here I was about to write a letter to Monsieur de Maugars, which I should have signed with my own name, to challenge him

to fight with me, and give me the satisfaction of meeting him with a weapon in my hand. Chance has brought you here, and the time for falsehood has gone by. So it is best to admit all, and I ask you to take a verbal message to Monsieur de Maugars, and bear to him the challenge which I was about to send him by letter."

"It would be better, for if I did not tell him myself that you are the author of the denunciations, he would refuse to believe it."

"They are in Brigitte's handwriting, like the articles sent to the papers, but I dictated them."

"Then you also dictated the letter which you handed to me in the Bois de Boulogne?"

"Yes."

"And you, undoubtedly, carried it there," said Souscarrière, with threatening bitterness.

"I imagined that Estelan had taken refuge at Monsieur Aubijoux's house, and I wished to make him leave that asylum, for it was my purpose to have him arrested, in order that the name of Monsieur de Maugars might be publicly disgraced by a criminal suit. On the other hand, I did not like to compromise Aubijoux by a thing of this kind; Aubijoux was my friend, and I did not wish that the police should go to his house. So I made Brigitte write to Estelan to induce him to leave it. I meant to have watched for his departure on the following night from the Boulevard de Montmorency, and I should have known where he went, and he would have been arrested when I chose to reveal where he had concealed himself. I had this warning letter in my pocket when I met you in the Allée des Longchamps in the Bois de Boulogne. I proposed going on horseback to Auteuil, and throwing the note over the wall of the park in a place where I felt sure that Aubijoux would catch sight of it. It was a sure means of causing Estelan to see it, for Aubijoux would have given it to him. The pistol-shot which we heard suggested another idea to me."

"Spare yourself the trouble of any further explanation, for I can guess that, seeing some resemblance to Estelan in the dead man's face, you thought the latter might, perhaps, be taken for him, and that people would suppose that Estelan was dead. So you arranged the ignoble comedy in which, thanks to you, I played the part of a fool. What was your aim? I know what it was. Maugars showed me the letter, in which you boast of having so combined your deceitful acts that Mademoiselle de Maugars was induced to believe that she could one day become the wife of my nephew, whom she loved before she married Estelan. She would not suffer enough without that, you wrote."

"I wrote what I thought."

"And the letter sent to Métel's paper to-day was intended to complete your infernal work? You wished that all Paris might know the horrible situation in which you had placed an unfortunate young girl."

"That is true. Monsieur Estelan told me yesterday that he would use the power which the law allows to husbands. It seemed to me as well that the scandal which will arise in the Count de Maugars' house should not pass unperceived."

"Estelan!" exclaimed Souscarrière. "Have you seen him?"

"I saw him yesterday evening at Aubijoux's house."

"But you did not tell him, I presume, that all his sorrows were due to you?"

"The time had not come for doing that. I first wished to settle

matters with my enemy, Monsieur de Maugars. When I have fought with him I will, if I survive, place myself at Monsieur d'Estelan's orders; should he wish to fight with me. I shall tell him all that I have done. I shall confess that I thought him guilty. That is my only excuse, and he will be free to act as he pleases in the matter."

"If he were satisfied with being told this, he would be a more amiable man than one generally meets with. As you knew his past, you knew that he was innocent."

"You are mistaken, sir. I saw Estelan ten years ago when he was called Vallouris. I went to Marseilles to settle an account with his employer, and I was still there when he disappeared. I heard that everybody believed him to be guilty of the theft, and up to the last moment I felt sure that he had taken the money. When he came to Paris under another name, last year, we met at Monsieur Aubijoux's office, and I recognised him perfectly, although he did not remember me."

"And you immediately formed the monstrous plan to make use of him to revenge yourself upon Maugars."

"I did. I had some acquaintance with the Baron de Neufgermain, and I suggested to him to introduce Vallouris to the Count de Maugars. Something told me that the match would be made, and it was made, without any interference on my part. It was not I who gave the notary Prunevaux the information which he furnished to the count respecting the man who wished to marry his daughter; it was Aubijoux."

"I trust that ~~he~~ was not your accomplice."

"He was entirely ignorant of my designs, and it was in all good faith that he recommended Estelan, of whom he had formed a good opinion in Mexico."

"It was you, then, who did everything, for it was you who led Prunevaux to ruin himself in taking the theatre for Mademoiselle Antonia."

"I had no need to urge him, but I did not dissuade him. I wished that Monsieur de Maugars might be ruined."

"You have the merit of frankness, at least," said Souscarrière, with contemptuous irony, for his patience was almost exhausted. "And you doubtless imagine that you have only to kill Monsieur de Maugars, and then to fight with Estelan, the unfortunate man whom you have driven to despair, and, perhaps, with Aubijoux, who will not feel very proud of having been your friend when he learns that you have committed so many base actions. You think that it will be enough to say to them 'I have given you the gravest offence, but I offer you the satisfaction of a duel;' you think that you can fight one after another in the order best suited to your hatred. You are mistaken, sir, you have lost the right of calling on an honest man to fight with you, and I swear to you that the Count de Maugars shall not cross steel with you. Between him and an informer an encounter is impossible."

"Very well, then," said Frédoc, coldly, "in that case I will everywhere proclaim his story and my own."

"You would dare to do that?"

"Why should I not? What have I to lose? My repose, my position, my reputation? What do they matter to me? Do you think that I have been planning revenge for twenty years to be stopped by worldly considerations? No, sir, I shall not draw back. I shall go on to the bitter end. I wish to disgrace the man who has deprived me of my happiness. I wish to reveal the life, the past misconduct of the Count

de Maugars, who passes for a 'knight without fear and without reproach.'

"You assert that my friend, my brother-in-arms, has committed acts for which he has cause to blush. This insult is a direct one for myself, and I will be the adversary you seek. We will fight, but I shall first call upon you to state your grievances."

"You wish to know what the Count de Maugars has done to me? Listen, sir, and when you have heard I will allow you to judge of my conduct."

Souscarrière was scarcely able to contain himself. The tone which was assumed by M. Frédoc irritated him beyond measure, but he said to himself at the same time that a man who spoke so openly and so loudly must at least be sustained by an earnest conviction that he was in the right.

"I have already judged your conduct to be unpardonable," he replied, "but I am curious to know what you can bring forward to justify it. Explain yourself, sir."

"I have not any occasion to defend myself," replied Frédoc. "I accuse another. Yes, I accuse Monsieur de Maugars, and I declare before Heaven and man that he has deserved to suffer all that he does suffer, and much more. I have told you that he stole my happiness from me. That is indeed the word. I was married and I was happy. He led my wife astray."

"At least you were not his friend."

"No, and I am glad that I was not. I had never even seen him, when he returned to France after a long sojourn in America."

"This," thought Souscarrière, "is the story that Maugars told me."

"And here he met my wife, I do not yet know how or where," resumed Frédoc. "Their acquaintance had lasted a year, when I discovered my misfortune—that I had been deceived by a woman whom I idolised, and who had once loved me herself. Monsieur de Maugars knew that we had made a love-match, although he did not know me; his accomplice told him everything, just as she sacrificed everything to him. But he cared little or nothing for the despair which he had brought upon an honest man, or for the ruin of a woman who would never have failed in her duty had she not met with him. It was but one love-affair the more to him. He followed his own ideas as to morality——"

"Is it by such commonplace remarks as this," exclaimed Souscarrière, "that you undertake to excuse the course which you have pursued? Do you take me for a fool, or for a country clown, who has always lived among savages? Maugars' morality has been like that of many other men in these days, and even in old times. I should not uphold it to any one, but I maintain that it is common, and that Maugars is not a monster. How do you know what allurements may have been used? And, be that as it may, Maugars, you admit, did not know you. He did not direct his course with reference to you in that way."

"You are pleading his cause, I see," said Frédoc, bitterly. "He would not undertake to do so himself."

"I do not wish to do so. I blame him very much. But when I compare his wrong-doing to your cruel revenge I cannot but feel for him; and I declare that any man of feeling would be indignant at such long-delayed and refined revenge as yours, which strikes at the innocent to punish the guilty."

"Then, according to you, I had only to bear my sufferings and shame

in silence? I ought to have imitated those husbands who so easily resign themselves to whatever befalls them."

"I have said nothing of the kind. You had the right and it was your duty to attack Maugars when you discovered that he was the lover of your wife. Had you challenged him, then he would not have refused to fight with you? I know what you will reply, for I read the letter which you wrote to him. In that pretty missive you spoke of those who are silenced by a sword-thrust. You will say that you would still have been the only real sufferer even in that case."

"No, sir, I do not say that, for if I had then been able to fight with Monsieur de Maugars, I would have forced him to accept a duel, face to face, two paces apart, and with only one pistol loaded."

"He would not have refused. I'll guarantee. What prevented you from challenging him to a duel of this kind?"

"He had fled from the country, taking my wife with him. The Atlantic ocean rolled between us. He sailed from Havre on the 19th of December, 1862, for New Orleans. When I received the letter in which my wife confessed everything, and told me of her departure, without stating where she was going, they were already on the sea."

"But could you not have gone after him? He would have given you satisfaction elsewhere as well as here."

"When I knew where he had gone, I learned that my unfortunate wife was dead."

"Dead!"

"Yes, of yellow fever, six days after her arrival."

"Maugars never told me all this! It is impossible!"

"Question him, sir. When he knows that you heard this from me, he will not dare to deny it. I could place the proof of his crimes before you; and when I say crimes, the word is not too strong, for, not content with taking my wife away with him, he also stole my daughter. Do you understand now, sir, why I have not hesitated to revenge myself upon *his* child?"

Souscarrière was stunned. These revelations, coming one upon another from Frédoc's lips had completely overcome him. He could not understand why, under the circumstances, Maugars should have concealed these strange facts from him, nor could he doubt their truth, for the most skillful actor cannot speak of such things with the emotion which Maugars' victim now displayed.

"Your daughter!" repeated Souscarrière. "Did he take her away too? What did he do with her?"

"What he did with her mother. He killed her."

"What is this that you dare to accuse him of?"

"Oh, he did not kill her with his own hand," replied Frédoc, bitterly. "My daughter was attacked with yellow fever at the same time as my wife, and did not survive her for four-and-twenty hours. I have every date, and I can prove what I say. Do you pretend that your friend is not responsible for the death of both of them?"

"He was very indirectly the cause, and you cannot say otherwise. He did not use force to take your wife to America, nor was it his fault if your daughter chose to go with her."

"My daughter was but two years old when she was taken from me."

"Then it is the mother who was to blame. But my head whirls with all this, and I cannot talk of it. If, as I suppose, you wish me to carry

any message to Monsieur de Maugars, finish what you have to say. I will listen and then reply."

"You ask me to tell you my story. It will not take long, and you will learn nothing that you have not already guessed, but all the same I will do as you ask. You have been told that my name is Yvrande. I was born in one of the southern provinces, and was an only son; my parents had what is called a fine fortune in the country. I lost them both when I was young, and found myself master of my own actions, when I came of age. I travelled about, for that was my passion. I spent fifteen years in seeing the world, and I was thirty-six years old when in 1858 I met a poor orphan in Mauritius, with whom I fell madly in love, and whom I married. Thirty months later my child was born, and I came to Paris intending to live here a year. I had never passed much time here till then; my wife was quite unacquainted with France. We had few friends, and did not wish to make any more. However, I remained here ten months. My daughter had been delicate at first. I did not suspect any change in my wife's feelings. I was happy, and had made up my mind to reside in Paris. But I had business interests in Mauritius, and was making preparations to go there, when, one evening in December, on my return home I found no one there. I thought that some accident must have happened, that a murder had been committed. I looked everywhere. I ran about Paris like a madman, and had made up my mind to apply to the police, when a letter was brought to me and apprised me of my misfortune. The woman who had betrayed me begged me to forgive her, and entreated me to forget her: she did not tell me who had led her to commit this act, nor did she say to what country she was being taken, and there was not a word in her letter about my daughter."

"This is almost incredible, and I must say that the most guilty of all--"

"Was not my wife. She was altogether inexperienced and very young. She had been seduced in the most criminal sense of the term. But by what odious sophistry had he led her—this Maugars—to believe that she had the right to take my daughter from me, I cannot tell, still he had no trouble in bewildering her mind after perverting it. She idolised the child, and believed that she loved the man who had ruined her. She carried away her daughter as a thing belonging to her, just as she carried away her wedding ring."

"I shall not discuss the point with you. Why did you not follow the fugitives at once?"

"You forget that I did not know where to look for them. They had taken every precaution. The letter from my wife had been posted at Nantes, and they had sailed from Havre. I spent three months in a fruitless search, and when at last I discovered that my wife had taken passage on a ship bound for New Orleans, I received news of her death and of my daughter's also."

"Who told you of this?"

"A French merchant, who lived at New Orleans. He said that they had been attacked by yellow fever, and that my wife, before her death, had begged him to inform me of all this. He sent me legalised papers from the French consulate there."

"Did his letter say nothing of Maugars?"

"No, this man was not acquainted with me; he simply said that Madame Yvrande and her child were attacked soon after arriving at New

Orleans by the terrible malady so prevalent there. He appeared to think that I had sent them to America. He told me at the same time, that he sent me, by a sailing vessel, a box containing a number of things which had belonged to my wife, and this reached me soon after her letter."

"And were you satisfied with this information? Did you not try to obtain further particulars?"

"I wrote at once to the merchant to obtain more precise details. I asked him the name of the Frenchman who had arrived at the same time as Madame Yvrande. I did not receive any reply. But don't imagine that I stopped at that. I went to Havre, asked several questions, and learned the name of the vessel in which my wife had set sail on December 19th. There were several passengers aboard. I saw the list, but how was I to guess which name was that of the man who had wronged me? My wife had paid for her own passage and that of her child and a nurse, a negress whom we had brought with us from Mauritius."

"But the Count de Maugars' name must have met your eyes in this list, and it was not a common one."

"It was not there. He had given an assumed name."

Souscarrière did not pretend to dispute this assertion, for he remembered that his friend had left for Louisiana, sailing from Havre in December, 1862.

"I did more," resumed Frédéric. "The ship would not return to France for a long time. It had gone to the West Indies after touching at New Orleans. I set out and found it at La Martinique. There the captain told me that the lady who had taken passage with a little girl and a coloured woman appeared to be very intimate with a Frenchman called Durand, who said that he was of commercial avocations. This was all that he could tell me. However, he described the man's appearance."

"And that coincides with the appearance of Maugars?" asked Souscarrière, who was listening with the closest attention.

"Feature for feature, as much later on I was fully able to ascertain. From La Martinique I went to New Orleans. There fresh annoyances awaited me. The merchant who had written to me was dead, and the fever had become an epidemic. The consul assured me that the papers declaring the death of my wife and daughter were correct, and said that they had died at an interval of two days at a French hotel, the landlord of which was with my wife at the last moment. But I was never able to find out what had become of the Frenchman, Durand, nor of the negress Aurore, who had both left the city on the day after the funeral. I returned to France in despair."

"But I cannot detect in this story any certain proof that it was Maugars who did all this," exclaimed Souscarrière.

"Wait, and you will not doubt it. I resolved to remain in Paris, for I had not given up the thought that one day I might meet the man who had wronged me; but I was obliged to return to Mauritius to sell a house which I had bought when I married. I was detained several years on the island by business. I was then obliged to go to India, and I returned to France only when the war began. I remained in the south till '71. Chance took me to Marseilles, where I met Louis Vallouris. In the little town where I was born I found Brigitte again, living on some money left her by my father. Nine years before, I had seen her as I passed by, and I had then had my wife and daughter with me. I told her of my troubles, and asked her to come with me to Paris, to which she consented. I

needed a devoted and reliable confidential servant. Brigitte belongs to a family of old servants who owed everything to my people; she had been brought up in the same house as myself, and her devotion is almost worship."

"She has proved that," thought Souscarrière to himself. "To write such letters is carrying one's attachment rather too far."

"When she learned the facts, Brigitte felt the same hatred that I did for the man who had misled my wife."

"But I say again that I see no proof that the seducer was the Count de Maugars."

"One day I was looking for my marriage certificate, which was among other papers in a casket which my wife had taken away with her, and which had been sent back to me from New Orleans, when my hand accidentally touched a spring, and in the casket, which had a double bottom, I found——"

"Letters from Maugars?"

"Letters with his signature, which told me all I had so vainly sought to discover. The projected flight to America was discussed in them, and the fact was mentioned that Monsieur de Maugars had an estate there. He told my wife that she would never be found, and to induce her to make up her mind to go with him, he promised her to love her daughter as his own."

"Still, her death was no fault of his," muttered Souscarrière.

"She would be alive now if he had not stolen her from me. Let me finish. I have little to add. When I made this discovery I had been living for six months in Paris in these rooms. When I left Mauritius to go to India I took another name. I wished to break with a painful past, and I had not lost all hope of revenge. I was rich, and altogether independent, as I had not a relative or friend in the world. Those whom I had formerly known had quite forgotten me. I made acquaintances, as it is easy to do in Parisian society, which only requires that a man should have good manners and be agreeable. I had given myself out to be an old bachelor, who had got over the gaieties of life, but who still loved the young, and I lived at a club most of my time, as idle and isolated men so often do."

"It was there that you became acquainted with my nephew?"

"I have always liked him."

"He liked you. It was a poor return to place him in the atrocious situation in which he now finds himself."

"Fatality brought him in the way of my revenge. But Heaven is my witness, that if I could repair the harm I have done him, I——"

"Go on, sir. Your regrets are but an additional insult. Why did you not at once challenge Monsieur de Maugars?"

"I thought at first that I would do so. I do not know whether he would have given me satisfaction for the wrong he had done me, for ten years had elapsed, and he might not have done so without being blamed. You would not have advised him to fight with me."

"A man can always be forced to fight; with Maugars, who is by no means patient, nothing could be easier."

"I learned that after my wife's death he had married a creole, and that he had a daughter whose age was about the same as my daughter's would have been. I also learned that his wife died in Louisiana, and that as soon as he became a widower he returned with his daughter to France."

This girl was eleven years old when I saw her for the first time. I had found out where her father lived and was watching for him, intending to insult and fight with him. He lives where he now is. I saw him come out with a lovely girl, whose grace and beauty brought back the recollection of the angel I had lost. My heart seemed to contract, and I could not strike the man who had outraged me in a way which his life only could repair. I waited."

"To prepare an abominable revenge. Really, sir, you understand feelings in a way which——"

"Oh, I do not ask you to excuse me, for you cannot understand me. You are not a father. You do not know what I have suffered. I had begun by cursing my wife, and had almost succeeded in forgetting her. That wound had almost healed, but I had never ceased for a single day to mourn for my daughter. I saw her ever before me, and I called upon her name. It seemed to me that I had just lost her. I used to kiss her portrait—a little miniature which showed her as she was when she was taken from me—it was all that remained to me of her. I endured this torture for eighteen years, and the latter ones have been those in which I have suffered the most. The happiness of the Count de Maugars exasperated my feelings. Every time that I met him with his daughter I felt as though my heart was being torn from my breast. I said to myself: 'There he is—he who robbed me of all that I held dear. He is happy, and I am alone in the world. My daughter was thrown into some unknown grave, and I had not even the consolation of carrying a few flowers to lay them upon the soil above her poor little body, for no one can tell me where it is.'"

There are words which no one can hear without emotion, and as Frédéric spoke Souscarrière could not but feel with him, although the old soldier's was no tender nature.

"Your nephew, sir," added Frédéric, "has no doubt told you that I was gay, that I never excused myself from any of those parties into which the young enter so eagerly, and that no one took me to be sixty years old. Those who saw me at such times little guessed the tortures of my soul. And this has gone on for years."

"And in order to cease suffering yourself, you made up your mind to torture my friends?" said Souscarrière, bitterly. "If you had only attacked Maugars, against whom you had really cause for complaint—but there is Madeleine, poor Estelan, too, and my nephew, what had they done to you? My nephew, you say yourself, was almost intimate with you."

"You do not know what hatred is when it has grown old in a suffering heart. I was naturally kind and loving. Ever since I came into the world I have done all the good it has been in my power to do. I still pass half my time in comforting the wretched and helping the poor. I am called in this neighbourhood 'the father of the poor.' The more I did to revenge myself, the more I did to help the sorrowful. It seemed to me that I made up for it in that way. Yes, I have been fierce in my hatred, unjust to others who were not guilty, and to reach my enemy I have trodden all human feelings under foot, and have struck blindly at the innocent. Do not believe, however, that I long meditated upon my pitiless plan. I laid it one day when I met Louis Vallourais, and remembered that he had been accused of theft. The Neufgermains thought him a good match for Mademoiselle de Maugars, whose dowry was but small. I did not at once determine to revenge myself by allowing him

to marry her and then denouncing him. I even wrote a letter—in order to prevent him from marrying her—in which I told the public prosecutor that a man named Vallouris, who had been long looked for as guilty of theft at Marseilles in 1870, had arrived in Paris. Had Estelan been arrested then, Monsieur de Maugars and his daughter would have no cause to complain. They did not even know him at that time. I believed him to be guilty, and I fancied that I was doing Aubijoux a service in removing an adventurer from his path. I did not, however, state that Vallouris was called Estelan, and that he lived in the Rue de Roune."

"Why not?"

"I will be frank, and say that the information which I gave was a kind of compromise between conscience and hatred. I trusted to chance. I said to myself: 'If this Vallouris is arrested it is because Heaven forbids this revenge.' Unfortunately, the public prosecutor had other matters on hand besides this old affair. My letter remained in a box with the rest of his letters. Vallouris was not even disturbed, and some months later he was betrothed to Mademoiselle de Maugars. My anger rose up afresh at this, but I still hesitated to use the poisoned weapon which fate had placed in my hand. On the day before the marriage I was still undecided. But an accidental meeting drove me to frenzy. I was going along the Rue Drouot when Mademoiselle de Maugars went into the municipal offices to go through the civil ceremony of marriage. I was wounded to the heart. She looked so happy and beautiful, and I thought of my poor dead child! I said to myself that if the father of the happy bride had not deprived me of my child, I, too, might have married her to a man whom she would have loved, and that I might have enjoyed her happiness and have ended my life beside her—that life made up of suffering by the Count de Maugars' fault. Thus I let my anger get the better of me, and that evening the public prosecutor received circumstantial information, as you know."

Souscarrière, more touched than he wished to appear, had not interrupted these final words. Still, the narrative which he had just heard did not clear Frédéric in his mind.

"Let it be as you say," he exclaimed, abruptly; "I admit that you may not have dwelt long upon this odious act, the first of a long series of cruelties; but the letter which caused the ruin of that unfortunate Estelan, and which led to the present position of Monsieur de Maugars, is a thing which you cannot excuse."

"I have but one word to say as to that, and it is not to justify myself, but to make you understand how one thing followed upon another, and led me further than I had meant to go. You told me that your nephew would marry Mademoiselle de Maugars if she became a widow. It was this imprudent remark which suggested to me a way of making my revenge complete. The suicide in the Bois gave me a chance by which I profited, and I had but to introduce Prunevaux to Antonia to make him squander Monsieur de Maugars' money by bringing her before the public. It seemed as though fate held out the snare which caused me to transgress the commandment to forgive our enemies. This is all that I have to say, sir. I do not dispute your opinion, and I can bear the responsibility of my own acts. I will merely add that I have always intended to present myself before Monsieur de Maugars, and say to him—'I have done this. Let us fight, and kill me if you can.' The letter which I wrote to him a few days ago proves what I tell you now,"

"It was anonymous, like the others."

"I did not sign it, as Monsieur d'Estelan's fate was not then settled. But it is so now. The time has come for me to show myself, and as an unforeseen occurrence has brought you here, I request you, sir, to tell Monsieur de Maugars all that I have said to you."

"And to challenge him?"

"I have already said so."

"Then you think that the duel with him will settle everything?"

"I am at the disposal of all whom I have offended."

"I do not hesitate to say that I hope that one or the other of us may put a bullet into your head, or six inches of steel into your body. It will be Estelan, my nephew, or me, and it matters little which of us it is. You are condemned to death, and you will die. But that is not enough. Everybody shall know what you are, that the Monsieur Frédoc who passed for a gentleman has stooped to acts of great baseness. You turn pale, sir. I have touched the right spot, and I really begin to think that you ought to be allowed to live, for you will suffer far more, and besides you do not deserve to die fighting, like a soldier before the enemy."

"You are mistaken," replied Frédoc, "I cannot suffer more than I have done, for Heaven has afflicted me so deeply that the contempt of my fellow creatures could not move me in the least. Whether they bless or curse me is indifferent to me. I have already formed my opinion of my own course of action."

"And do you excuse it?"

"I shall not reply. You now know everything. I am at Monsieur de Maugars' orders and at yours."

"I have but one more question to ask," said Souscarrière, taking his hat, which he had placed upon a chair. "You told me just now that you met Estelan last night at Aubijoux's house. I saw him myself yesterday morning."

"I am aware of that."

"Then, if he spoke of the conversation we had together, he must have told you that I advised him not to attempt to compel his wife to live with him."

"Aubijoux told me that, and asked my advice."

"Then I should like to know what you advised him to do, and what are his intentions."

"Aubijoux thought that Estelan ought to give up his wife and fight with Monsieur de Bautre."

"He was right."

"I do not agree with him."

"Then you urged Estelan to use force, to compel his wife to live with him."

"I advised him not to challenge Monsieur de Bautre, who is not called upon to meet him. Monsieur de Bautre was free to love Monsieur de Maugars' daughter, as he believed her to be a widow. He did not knowingly give offence to Monsieur d'Estelan, as he supposed him to be dead. As regards the course which Monsieur d'Estelan ought to pursue as to his wife, I have no advice to give. But I did not hide my opinion, which is that he would be very wrong in supposing that she would be touched by resignation on his part, and voluntarily return to him."

"The conclusion is that he ought to employ the police. I fully expected that you would say so. And I suppose that Monsieur d'Estelan

will follow this plan. It remains for us to prevent this scandalous proceeding, if possible. I leave you now, sir, and shall not see you in this place again. I am now going to the Count de Maugars, and I shall faithfully repeat all you have said. He shall decide what is to be done, for his cause is mine, and I will inform you of his decision."

"I shall await it," replied Frédoc, calmly.

Souscarrière turned away, and went out, closing the door behind him with such violence that Brigitte ran into the ante-room quite startled.

Bantru's uncle gave the ever-devoted housekeeper an angry look, and hastened down the stairs, muttering:

"Frédoc is a monster, but Maugars only told me part of the truth. To take away his wife and his child too was unheard-of cruelty. Poor Madeleine! she has to suffer for her father's acts. The devil fly away with all seducers!"

VI.

MADELEINE had almost been killed by the shock which the sight of Estelan had caused her. She had remained unconscious for more than an hour, and could not be taken to her father's house until the evening.

M. de Maugars passed the night with her, and Souscarrière offered his services at every moment. They both did what they could to console and calm her. They did not succeed, however; the poor girl wept bitterly, and wished herself dead. Her cries of grief were heartrending. On the next day, when yielding to the physical prostration which follows upon excessive grief she at last fell asleep, the two friends consulted together. The situation was a painful one, and they could not find a way out of it. On the evening before, they had hoped to get rid of Estelan by leaving the country at once. They had made up their minds to go to La Bretèche and arrange there to take passage on board of a steamer from Saint-Nazaire.

Bantru, who was in a state of utter dejection, was preparing for his departure, having decided to enlist in the Chasseurs d'Afrique, and he had the courage not to attempt to see the woman whom fatality bound to a husband she no longer loved.

Madeleine had been alarmed and then grieved by Guy's absence, and Souscarrière had been at great pains to give plausible reasons for his remaining away. He spoke of matters which unfortunately kept him away from Paris, and as Madeleine did not fully credit what he said, he pretended that Guy meant to surprise her, and would come to see her in Anjou before they sailed.

The plan which Souscarrière and Maugars had formed was to leave Madeleine in ignorance of Estelan's existence, to persuade her to leave France, and then only to reveal the truth to her. It could not be always kept from her, and M. de Maugars intended to tell her everything when the vessel which was bearing them to Louisiana had set sail.

The two friends had flattered themselves that they would thus rid themselves of Estelan, who would probably seek his wife as soon as he was set at liberty. Souscarrière had inquired and found out that the hearing of witnesses and the examination of Rangouze would occupy some time, and, as justice does not dismiss accused prisoners very easily, Estelan could not leave jail before three or four days or a week.

Ere this delay was over, Monsieur de Maugars and his daughter would

be at La Bretèche. Souscarrière, who would remain in Paris, undertook to hold out against Estelan and detain him, meaning, if necessary, to send him to look for his wife after she was gone.

The father and daughter had left Vésinet for their old rooms on the Place de la Trinité, and they had intended to leave Paris on the day after that terrible morning when Madeleine again beheld the husband whom she believed to be dead. He rose up suddenly before her in the private room at the Grand Hôtel, and it then became necessary to tell Madeleine all that had happened since the morning of her wedding.

Souscarrière opened the conference with Maugars by telling him of his altercation with Estelan, and he did not conceal from the count that he had promised that the young man should see his wife and speak with her. To his great surprise Maugars made no objection to this; he did not dispute his son-in-law's right to demand an interview.

There had been a change in the count's mind, since he could no longer doubt Estelan's innocence. Feelings of more just a character had taken the place of his savage hatred. He admitted his own wrong-doing, and regretted having given way to the anger which had been the cause of Estelan's leap from the window. He was almost willing to admit that he only had himself to accuse for the troubles which had followed since that day. But he was not yet ready to give up Madeleine. He regretted that she loved Guy de Bautru, as they could not marry, but he was reluctant to resign her to Louis d'Estelan. He therefore agreed with Souscarrière as to a plan of departure when the interview between Madeleine and Estelan had taken place.

However, the two friends determined that Madeleine should finally decide for herself. If, as they hoped, she preferred exile, Souscarrière undertook to arrange for her departure with Maugars—with or without Estelan's permission. If, on the contrary, Madeleine submitted, it would be for her to regulate as she pleased the sad life which this enforced marriage condemned her to endure. And it was to the interest of all the parties to put an end to this intolerable suspense. So, without consulting Madeleine, who was sleeping, but with the consent of Maugars, Souscarrière wrote to Estelan that he was at liberty to call upon his wife in the afternoon, and he gave the letter to a trusty messenger.

This having been done, the count asked his friend to undertake a disagreeable mission in his place.

The Marchioness de Puygarrault had remained at Vésinet. Maugars had not thought fit to tell her of the recent events which had upset all his plans. He knew his cousin's disposition, and was anxious to avert painful scenes and useless recrimination. She had already declared that she would not accompany Madeleine and her cousin to Anjou, or leave her residence in the environs of Paris to go and "perch among owls," which she said was what they intended to do. The ex-colonel, however, did not care about angry words. He did not trouble himself with the old dowager's assaults, and did not shrink from the task of telling her to what extreme measures her relatives had been driven.

So after breakfast he started off to Vésinet, leaving M. de Maugars to prepare his daughter for a painful interview. Little did Souscarrière think that chance would bring him in the way of the invisible enemy who had worked all this evil.

Maugars had forgotten that such an enemy existed, for his mind was entirely engrossed with the sad troubles of the present. The count was no

longer the haughty man of former days. His pride had given way under all the troubles he had met with, and his temper had become less aggressive. He no longer attempted to struggle, or hoped for anything good, but allowed himself to drift along the tide of events which he could not control.

The certainty which he had slowly arrived at, of the wrong manner in which he had treated Estelan, had much to do with the giving way of his stern will.

After Souscarrière's departure, when the count found himself alone in the room where he had received the detective who had called to arrest his son-in-law, he called himself to account, repented of his violent proceedings, pitied Estelan, and decided that he owed him reparation. He thereupon resolved not to influence the decision of Madeleine in any way. He was, however, obliged to prepare her for the interview with her husband. As soon as Estelan received Souscarrière's letter, he would certainly appear, and the count, who knew Madeleine's character, was positive that she would not refuse to receive him.

Madeleine, as yet, knew nothing of what awaited her, but she seemed to apprehend something all the morning, and she had watched her father and Souscarrière as though she tremblingly awaited unpleasant revelations of some kind or other.

"What an awakening!" said M. de Maugars to himself, as he leaned upon a table, holding his head in his hands. "And how shall I confess that it was my anger that has led to all this?"

He had been questioning himself thus for some time, and the daylight was already waning as he still asked himself how he could make the communication least painful to his daughter. Suddenly a slight noise made him turn his head. Madeleine was before him, pale, but calm. She had not taken off her mourning attire, and had found strength to dress herself, as if she had foreseen that Estelan would appear. She threw herself into her father's arms, and their tears mingled; but she soon regained her self-possession, and she spoke while M. de Maugars still wept.

"Why do you grieve so much, father?" she said softly. "Do you think that I shall fail to do my duty?"

"Your duty, poor child!" exclaimed the count. "You do not know to what sacrifices you condemn yourself. Your husband has the right to take you away from all those whom you love. And he will enforce this right."

"He will not expect me to leave you."

"You are mistaken. He hates me, and he has reason to hate me."

"Hates you! That is impossible; you are too good and kind. You chose him because you thought that he would make me happy."

"You do not know—you cannot know. Listen, Madeleine, and prepare to suffer even more than you have suffered so far. Your husband has been accused of having committed a theft."

"What do you say?"

"The truth. He was about to be arrested when you left the church. It was I who received the detective, who displayed a warrant, speaking of events which occurred ten years ago. I believed that Estelan was guilty. I handed him a pistol and bade him blow out his brains."

"What! without hearing him or asking him——"

"His explanations did not satisfy me as to his innocence. I reproached him with what he had done. I was hard and unjust. Then he threw

himself out of the window to which you were hastening when I held you back, for I had just seen him lying upon the ground covered with blood, and I thought that he was dead. I wished to spare you the horrid sight. Some hours afterwards I heard that he had survived the fall. I did not tell you of it, for then I must also have told you that the man whose name you bore was accused of theft. 'Forgive me, Madeleine—forgive me for my lack of courage!'

"It was I who was cowardly, father. I ought to have torn myself from your arms and have begged you to take me to the body in which life still lingered. Instead of that I wept and fainted, and was as cowardly as I was yesterday when I again beheld the man whom I had forgotten far too soon."

"Do not blame yourself, Madeleine. Who could have met with such shocks without giving way? Excuse me for having doubted your power of endurance. I ought not to have concealed anything from you. I ought to have told you that your husband was living, that he was accused of a disgraceful act, and I ought then to have taken you to America."

"You asked me to go, and I agreed to do so. I should have refused if I had known that I was not a widow. I would not have abandoned my husband when he was unjustly persecuted."

"Yes, unjustly indeed. The truth is known at last. The true culprit has been found. Estelan is cleared and is free."

"He has been in prison, then, and I did not know it!"

"He only remained there a few days, and we did not know it till it was too late to tell you. We have been overwhelmed by unheard-of fatalities. A short time after Estelan disappeared, a man who had just killed himself was found in the Bois de Boulogne, and was supposed to be your husband. I myself thought that this man was Estelan. Later on I believed that you might become happy by marrying again, and that was why I encouraged you to love Guy de Bautru."

"Do not speak of him," said Madeleine.

"I succeeded only too well," said Maugars, bitterly, "for you love him, and you have no right to do so. Do you understand my despair? Do you understand how I curse myself for being the cause of your misfortunes, and having placed you in the most painful situation possible? I idolise you, Madeleine, but I have been your executioner."

"You, father? I swear to you that I have no feeling towards you but one of gratitude. I was a child, and I allowed you to guide my fate. How could I know that the feeling I had for Guy de Bautru was love? I know it now, but Heaven forbid that I should reproach you for having approved of this affection too late. I shall ever bless you, father, and you must promise me that we shall never part."

"Never, if you wish that I should remain with you, Madeleine. It depends upon you to bring back the happy days of your girlhood and to return to Louisiana, where you were born, and where I still own an estate, on which we can both live, and where no one will look for us. The past will seem but an evil dream. Our friend Souscarrière has prepared everything for our departure, and no one will know where we are going. Say but the word, and in a few days we shall be on the sea."

"Would you go away without my husband?" asked Madeleine.

"He would refuse to go with you. I tell you that he hates me and will never forgive me the wrong I have done him. Estelan would refuse to live with me. Between him and me you must make your choice."

Madeleine hung her head without replying. She was weeping.

"Yes," resumed the count with an emotion which made his voice tremble, "between him and me; for Guy de Bautru must be spoken of between us no more. He is going to Africa. You must sacrifice your love to your husband, who has suffered unjustly, but you are not called upon to sacrifice your father to him. He ought not to have concealed himself. He ought to have let us know that he was alive, instead of leaving us without news of him."

In speaking thus Maugars forgot—and perhaps he did so voluntarily—that his son-in-law had so often wandered around his house at Vésinet and thrown flowers to Madeleine. But he had many reasons for not being impartial.

"He did not know, perhaps, that I believed him to be dead," said Madeleine.

"You defend him!" exclaimed the count. "You will perhaps say that it was natural for him to appear now, after having abandoned you when he feared to show himself, that he can claim you as a master claims a slave?"

"Does he know that I love Monsieur de Bautru?" asked the young girl, with an effort.

"He does. Souscarrière told him so, and also that his nephew had ceased to visit you, and was going to Algiers and would not return. A gentleman, in Estelan's place, would not have consented to be outdone in generosity. He would not attempt to take forcible possession of a heart that no longer belongs to him. He would not present himself in the name of the law."

"Has he done so?"

"He will do so. When he saw you fall senseless at his feet he took pity upon you, and waited to use his rights until you were able to receive him. But he wishes to see you; he demands it. Our friend thought it best that I should not oppose this demand, and I have consented to it."

"He will come here, then?" asked Madeleine, starting.

"Yes, he is coming."

"To-day?"

"In an hour—perhaps before. Souscarrière wrote to him this morning that my house was open to him. I have been asking myself all day whether you will be able to bear the interview which we have had the weakness to agree to."

"I must do so," replied Madeleine, firmly, "and I wish to receive him alone."

"I agree with you as to that. I prefer not to see him for fear of being unable to control myself. You do not intend, I hope, to humble yourself to this man whom you honoured by marrying?"

Madeleine did not reply. She had a truer sense of the situation than her father, and intended to appeal to her husband's feelings, and ask him to judge her. She saw that her father would not give way as to the separation from himself and the departure for Louisiana. And on the other hand she despaired of inducing Estelan to yield to Maugars.

A servant came in, at this moment, bringing Estelan's card.

"Ask the gentleman to wait a moment," said M. de Maugars, "and do not receive any one else, unless it should be Monsieur Souscarrière." Then, when the servant had left the study, he added: "He is there," and pointed to the door which communicated with the drawing-room.

Madeleine turned pale, but replied without hesitation: "I will go to him."

"Promise me that you will not let him tear you from your father," said the count in a hoarse voice.

"I swear that I love you more than anything else in the world, and that I shall always love you, happen what may," replied Madeleine. And she went into the drawing-room where her husband awaited her.

M. de Maugars was strongly tempted to follow her, but he remembered that he had promised Estelan, through Souscarrière, that he should see his wife alone, and he had power enough over himself not to leave the study.

Estelan was standing, and looked as cold and as formal as a judge. Frédoc's advice had borne its fruit. On the day before, when Estelan had seen Madeleine swooning in the Count de Maugars' arms, he had rushed forward to help her, and, if Souscarrière had not checked his impulse then, he might have fallen at her feet, and the scene would have ended, if not in reconciliation, at least in peace. When Estelan consulted Aubijoux he was inclined to condone the past. He was inclined to be generous and indulgent, and to wait until Madeleine had forgotten a love which could not have taken such deep root in her heart in so short a time.

He admitted that he had been wrong in not letting her know aught of his situation during the interval between his release and their wedding. But Frédoc's aphorisms concerning women had entered the husband's wounded heart like arrows. Frédoc had cynically declared that women ought never to be yielded to, and that none but madmen used entreaty with them. He had declared that they were without gratitude, and only cared for those who forced them to obey. He had maintained that if Estelan did not enforce his rights, Madeleine would ridicule him with her lover. And so the husband now arrived firmly resolved to put into practice the imperious theories of the bitter old man.

"I have not come here to ask you to explain your conduct," he began abruptly, and in a harsh tone; "I do not expect you to ask me to account for mine. Your father and his friend must have told you everything. I have come to take you away, madame."

"I am ready to go with you," replied Madeleine, at once.

Estelan started. He had not expected to find her so calm and resigned, and the submission of the Count de Maugars' daughter touched him even more than it surprised him. He almost changed his tone, but rebelling against a feeling which he took for weakness, he resumed: "I thought that you loved Monsieur de Bautru?"

"I have loved him and I still love him; but I shall compel myself to forget him."

"But you are not sure of being able to succeed?"

"I am sure of being able to do my duty, and my duty is to obey you."

"Then it is only from duty that you consent to be my wife? You did not speak to me like that before the law gave me a right over you. No one compelled you to hear me, and I had the folly to imagine that you married me because you loved me."

"You were not wrong."

"And your feelings have changed in less time than it took me to please you. They will perhaps change again. One of your defenders held out that consoling prospect to me. Of what kind of wax is your heart made that its impressions are effaced as easily as footsteps in the sand? The wind that blows away the old love brings you the seed of the new. And

you talk to me of duty. Do you think that yours consists in that paltry word—duty?"

"I should not have pronounced such a word if you had not said, 'I require you to come with me.'"

"Ought I to have said, 'I beg of you,' and have knelt at your feet when I have a right to exact? You have betrayed me; I have been slandered, tracked, and shamed. It is the fault of your father that I have suffered like this, for it was he who was the real cause of my being accused, and it was he who drove me away to leave the field open for his friend's nephew. And you expect me to come here as a suppliant? He perhaps thought so, and no doubt you have told him that you would receive me by obliging me to submit to his caprices in order to win your favour."

"I have said nothing to my father that I have not said to you."

"Will you deny that he wishes to take you to Louisiana with him?"

"He has never thought of taking me away in spite of you."

"But if I allowed you to go with him you would gladly go?"

"I shall never do anything with gladness now. I have suffered, and I still suffer as much as you do."

"You suffer because you are separated from Monsieur de Bautru!" exclaimed Estelan, in a bitter tone.

"I have suffered through you, for I have wept for you and you allowed me to weep. Your silence left me free to give way to feelings which were stronger than my own will. A letter from you would have saved me. But you lived and I did not know it. You hid yourself from me as though you thought that I made common cause with your enemies."

"Question your father. If he is truthful he will tell you that I never ceased to think of you for one moment. He knows that very well, for he is aware that I was arrested at the Saint-Lazare station at the moment when I was taking my ticket for Vésinet. I went there every evening and passed my nights in gazing at the villa where you lived."

"But you did not enter it."

"Had I done so, your father would have received me just as he would receive me now if I appeared before him, and you would have fainted just as you did yesterday at the Grand Hôtel. No, I did not attempt to speak to you, for I did not imagine that you had been led to believe that I was dead, and I had the folly to rely upon you. I said to myself: 'The heart makes no mistake. Her woman's instinct will tell her that I have serious reasons for not showing myself, and she will know that I do not forget her, since every morning she will find fresh flowers upon her favourite bench.'"

"What! were those flowers——"

"I bought them. I climbed over the railing while you slept. And I remained all night in the woods looking up at your windows. I was a fool, was I not? When I caught a glimpse of you I took away a full store of happiness with me, which consoled me for the frightful position in which your father's violence had placed me. One evening, to spare you a painful scene, I fled from a man."

"Was that you?" exclaimed Madeleine.

"Yes, it was I; I saw you and you saw me. You were walking about with this man, who set out in pursuit of me. You went with him into the green-house, which is at the end of the garden. This man—I did not know it then—is the one whom you loved and still love. But why speak

of the past? I live, I am at liberty, and I can walk with my head erect; your father himself dares not dispute my rights. You have said that you are ready to follow me. I ought, perhaps, to take you at your word and remove you from this house at once. Your father did not grant me any time when he handed me a revolver and bade me use it against myself. He refused to listen to my explanations; he summoned me to kill myself without allowing me time to bid you farewell. I shall be less cruel than he was. I will give you three days to prepare to leave him, and I charge you to explain what I require of you. I am going away. My interests are in Mexico. I am going to return there, and as a woman's place is at her husband's side, you will go with me. If I decide to remain there, you will remain also. If I return to Europe, we will return together. In one word, wherever I go you will follow."

"It is my duty," replied Madeleine, "and I have already told you that I shall do it."

"Yes, it is your duty and your punishment at the same time. I do not require that you should love me, but that you should go wherever I go. As for your father, he shall do as he pleases. I would not prevent him from living in the country where you live. I would not even prevent you from seeing him. I only ask you never to speak of him to me. I shall interfere if I find that he tries to take you away from my authority to subject you to his own. As for his friends who are yours also, I hope that they will not have the audacity to come where I am. Monsieur Souscarrière has given me his word that his nephew is going away——"

"And he told the truth," said a loud voice, now heard at the same moment as the sound of an opening door, and Souscarrière burst into the room.

"Why are you here, sir?" asked Estelan, angrily; "you promised not to disturb my interview with my wife." And as he spoke he went towards Souscarrière in a threatening manner.

"So I did," replied Souscarrière, "but you will thank me when I tell you why I have come. I now know the wretch who informed against you."

"Who is he?"

"It is Monsieur Frédoc, the friend of your friend Monsieur Aubijoux—Monsieur Frédoc, whom you said yesterday that you did not know, but who knows you very well."

"When you mentioned him I did not remember that I had ever seen him before, but I did meet him a few days after I came to Paris. You cannot make me believe that he has been so villainous as to——"

"Ask him. He will tell you all that he told me. It was not at you that he aimed in all this; it was the Count de Mangars whom he pursued with his hatred. He only denounced you to dishonour the count, and if he invented a diabolic stratagem to make us believe that you were dead it was because he wished to complete his revenge by injuring your wife as well. He knew that my nephew——"

"Enough, sir! Do you swear that this story is not made up to turn me from the design which I have formed——"

"None of us wish to deprive you of your authority over your wife. Madeleine, I am sure, has said as much. This man lives in the Rue de la Bienfaisance, on the right. You will find him there. I need not say how I should treat a man who has acted as he has acted towards you. He will have ~~me~~ to deal with besides."

"Enough, sir; I will deal with this wretch myself," replied Estelan, coldly.

"You are going to fight—to expose your life!" exclaimed Madeleine, making a motion as if to restrain him.

Her husband saw this perhaps involuntary movement, which came so evidently from her heart that he turned pale, and his eyes became suffused. He was greatly agitated, but he controlled himself.

"Of what consequence is my life?" he said. "If I am killed you will be happy, for you can marry again." And as he spoke he hurriedly left the room.

"Good heavens! what have you done?" exclaimed Madeleine, trembling.

"What was my duty, my dear child," replied Souscarrière, who was perfectly calm. "I have discovered the author of all our misfortunes, and I have come to tell your father. Where is he?"

"In his own room. I will call him."

The door opened as Madeleine spoke, and the count appeared. "Is it you?" he said to Souscarrière. "What is the matter?"

"I must speak with you."

"Where is Estelan?"

"Gone. He was obliged to go. I will tell you everything."

M. de Maugars went up to his daughter, took both of her hands in his, and asked: "What did this man say to you?"

"That he wishes me to go wherever he goes."

"What did you answer?"

"That I should obey him," replied Madeleine.

"Unhappy girl! Do you wish to drive me to despair?"

"Do you not see that she is weeping?" replied Souscarrière. "Let her go to her own room, for I have a great deal to tell you about our common enemy."

"What do you mean?"

"I will tell you. Leave us, my dear Madeleine."

Madeleine, who was weeping bitterly, kissed her father, gave her hand to Souscarrière, and left the room.

"I could not speak out before your daughter," said the colonel, "as what I have to say concerns your former misdemeanours."

"Souscarrière!" exclaimed the count, angrily.

"Your love affair with a married woman whom you carried off, and whose husband has declared a *vendetta* which he has been plotting for the last eighteen years."

"Why do you bring up this story, which I told you myself not a week ago?"

"I now know who is your enemy, the man whom we despaired of ever finding."

"I told you that his name was Yvrande."

"Yes; but he changed it for that of Frédoc."

"Frédoc! What, the Frédoc about whom you spoke so often, and who was your nephew's friend and yours?"

"The same.. You suspected him for a time, and you were quite right in doing so. It is he who, in 1862, lived in Paris with his young wife, who was much younger than himself or you, for he is of your age. His housekeeper wrote the anonymous letters for him, and was so imprudent as to take one of them in person to Métel's office. He started out after

her, met me, and by following her I came upon Frédoc himself, who did not hesitate to acknowledge that he was your enemy. He added that he did not regret what he had done, and with the utmost boldness he said that he considered himself the injured party, and wished to fight a duel with you. His language and manner coincided with his letter to you, and with the intentions expressed in it when we read it together at the restaurant in the Rue du Havre."

"He admits, then, that he informed against my son-in-law, and waited until he was married to do so; that he wrote the letter found in the Bois——"

"He admits everything, and boasts of it besides. He declares that you carried off his wife; and that she died in Louisiana of yellow fever. He told me even more than you confessed. He accuses you of stealing his child as well as his wife. How could you commit an act like that?"

"What did he say about the child?"

"He said that she died at the same time as her mother. He reproaches you more bitterly for that than even for taking away his wife. He idolised the little girl, who would have lived had you not taken her to a country where yellow fever is so prevalent. The law of retaliation follows you, and reaches you in the person of Madeleine. Your daughter's happiness drove Frédoc mad. He was eloquent in comparing his own sufferings, deprived as he is of a daughter's love and companionship, with your happiness in the possession of such a girl as Madeleine, whom he has often seen with you, looking so beautiful and enjoying life. He could not endure the sight of that."

M. de Maugars hung his head and was silent, to the great surprise of Souscarrière, who expected his friend to justify himself to some extent, or at least to attempt to do so. The count's attitude was certainly calculated to astonish him, knowing as he did his friend's usually violent disposition, that of a man accustomed to command and never to give way, no matter how wrong he might be either in word or act.

However, M. de Maugars listened, bending like a guilty man under the bitter reproaches of Frédoc, as repeated by the lips of his own sincere and devoted friend. It was evident that he admitted the justice of the words and had deserved them; but—a much more surprising phenomenon—he did not say a word to blame the atrocious revenge so tardily dealt out upon him.

Souscarrière thought that there was something behind it all which he was still ignorant of. Maugars would not be so abject, so crushed, had he not something more on his conscience than an elopement with a woman who had certainly been as greatly to blame as himself. So, seating himself beside the count, who had thrown himself upon a sofa, the old soldier said:

"My poor Maugars, I hope that you do not misunderstand me. You would be greatly mistaken if you thought that I had gone over to the enemy. My duty is to tell you what the man who pursues you with his hatred asserts that you did to injure him. He has gone very far in his revenge, and we have the right to treat him like a wild beast. It is idle to add that I am not in favour of any violent measures, and object to revolvers and savage methods of all sorts. Still, Frédoc is what is called in civilised countries a *gentleman*, and you would not disgrace yourself if you fought a duel with him. This long, sad story can have no other conclusion, and he desires to fight with you. He charged me to bear his challenge to you."

At these words the count shuddered from head to foot, and his pale face became painfully contracted.

"This is amazing," thought Souscarrière, who had his eye upon him; "I should fancy that he was afraid if I did not know him so well." And he resumed aloud: "My dear friend, if I had only consulted my own feelings I should have taken this affair upon my own shoulders. I should have boxed the ears of this fellow Frédoc, who has made my nephew so unhappy. He has brought Guy, who never gave him offence, into this matter in the most disgraceful manner. I should have made him feel my anger, and I should not have been in the wrong. But I thought that, justly speaking, it was you who ought to have the pleasure of giving him a good sword-thrust; for what he has done to Guy is nothing to what he has made you suffer. So I left the field open to you, and you can meet him whenever you please."

"Never!" said M. de Mangars, in a hoarse voice.

"What! you refuse this duel which I have accepted for you?"

"I cannot kill this man, or even cross swords with him."

"Why not?"

"Because he is sacred to me."

"Sacred! May I be hanged if I can guess what you mean. But if you have private reasons for avoiding this encounter, let us say no more. I will tell Frédoc that you will not fight with an anonymous denouncer of others. You have given proof, often enough already, that you are a man of courage, and no one will think that you draw back from cowardice. I have, however, reserved myself the privilege of meeting this man, and I stand next to you on his list."

"You ought not to fight with him either."

"Oh! that is a little too much! Why not, I beg?"

"For the same reason that restrains me."

"I warn you that no such evasive answer will prevent me from doing so. But admitting that Monsieur Frédoc is 'sacred' to me also—which seems to me rather too much to believe—there is my nephew who has been made a plaything of by him, and for whom he laid an abominable trap. If he had let him alone he would not be heart-broken now. Guy has a perfect right to ask satisfaction of him."

"Your nephew ought not to run the risk of killing Frédoc."

"Worse and worse! Well, there is Estelan. He has been outrageously slandered by him, and thrown into prison."

"He can do as he pleases, but if he knew the truth he would not fight with him."

"I cannot understand all this, and if you continue to talk in this puzzling way I shall be obliged to go away without knowing what to reply to Frédoc. We must come to some decision, and I will not conceal from you that if you persist in hiding I know not what secret from me, which, according to you, places this man beyond our attacks, I shall follow my own course and soon settle the matter."

The count remained silent.

"Come now, Mangars," resumed Souscarrière, "I have been your friend for thirty-five years; you cannot mistrust me. Open your heart to me and rely upon my devotion, whatever you may ask and whatever you may have to tell me. Speak, my friend; explain yourself. I am surprised that you should hesitate, as though you had committed a crime."

"How do you know that I have not done so?"

"You? What stuff! You are the most honourable man in the world, whatever the errors of your past may be."

"There are criminal errors, and I was no longer young when I erred as I did."

"You will quote a play that I once heard, I suppose, and in which the line occurs:

"I was forty, fully forty when I sinned,"

but the age is no matter. I am sure that you have not done anything dishonourable."

"Listen, I will tell you everything. I don't ask you to excuse my sins, nor shall I complain however severely you may judge them. This man told you that he lived in Paris in 1862, did he not?"

"Yes. He even told me where. It was at the Hôtel Meurice in the Rue de Rivoli."

"Well, I had returned from Louisiana when one day in the Tuileries Garden I met a woman with whom I fell madly in love. She was fully as much in love with me afterwards, and we were so infatuated that we swore we would never part. I even became so insane that I wanted to pick some idle quarrel with her husband and kill him in a duel; but I never met him, and did not even know him by sight."

"Such behaviour as this is only to be met with in Paris," said Souscarrière, by way of philosophising. "Did the woman urge you to provoke her husband to fight?"

"No. She was a woman of peculiar disposition, and had married her husband out of what she believed to be love. She had met this Yvrande in the Island of Mauritius, and had become his wife at an age when in France a woman is thought to be no more than a child."

"Never mind all that! The usual story, I suppose, of finding out that she had never known what love was till she met with you. That is the regular thing. I know all about it."

"Clara had conceived a horror of Yvrande."

"Her name was Clara, was it? It is a horrid name. I prefer Madeleine," muttered Souscarrière.

"She had never really loved him, and when she knew her own heart she could not endure life with a man whom she had deceived. She was very proud, her position became intolerable to her, and she every day entreated me to fly with her and end an odious situation. I resisted for a long time. I told her that a woman could not give up her social duties, that she was a wife and a mother, and that she ought not to abandon her child. I even went so far as to tell her that in voluntarily giving up her regular position she would condemn herself to a very sad future. I felt instinctively that the result of all this would be some great evil to myself, but I had not the courage to break with her, and my words had no effect, so great was her infatuation. She cared nothing for law or social duty, and only listened to her love."

"How is it that so staid a man as Frédoc could have fallen in love with so impulsive a woman?"

"She bewitched me as completely as though I had been a boy of twenty."

"From what Frédoc said, her child must have been very young."

"She loved her wildly, and insisted upon taking her with her when she left her home."

"I should have thought that the prospect of taking a nurse and child

with you would have calmed your ardour, and hers, as well. Did you never look upon carrying off the child as a bad action?"

"It was a bad action, no doubt, but she did not tell me beforehand that she had actually resolved upon taking the child with her. It was agreed that she should leave Paris alone, and that I should meet her at Havre, on a ship, on board which she had taken passages for herself and me in false names. She said nothing about the child at the time, and I felt sure that she would leave it with its father. We had made up our minds to go on board separately, and we had decided that even when we sailed we would not pretend to be man and wife. You may imagine my consternation when, on the day after we set sail, I found her on deck, playing with a beautiful little girl, two years old, and with a mulatto woman beside her who was the child's nurse."

"She had done as she pleased! Heaven pardon her! She was bitterly punished, as she died as well as the child when they reached Louisiana."

"Her daughter is living," replied Maugars in so low a tone that Souscarrière could scarcely hear what he said.

"Living!" exclaimed the colonel. "Have you lost your mind, or are you making game of me?"

"She is alive, I tell you," answered Maugars, hanging his head.

"But Frédoc maintains that she is dead. He even says that he has papers to prove it."

"He was deceived."

"Who deceived him?"

The count did not reply.

"Come, now, Maugars, explain yourself," said Souscarrière, "for I cannot understand you at all. Have you any proof that she is alive?"

"Yes."

"Then you know where she is?"

"I do."

"And you could have restored this man's child to him? That would have prevented all this infamous persecution."

"You forget that I could not possibly conjecture that Monsieur Yvrando had assumed the name of Frédoc."

"But now that you know it, what prevents you from telling him where his child is to be found. For Heaven's sake give his daughter back to him, and do so as soon as possible, if only to prove to him that he is wrong, and when you have done that I will treat him as he deserves. Then there will be nothing to prevent your fighting with the fellow."

There was a pause, and the Count de Maugars, who was pale and nervous, seemed like a man haunted by some dreadful recollection.

"I promised to tell you all," he said at last. "I will keep my promise, cost what it may. Listen to what I have still to tell, and if, after hearing it, you withdraw your friendship from me, I shall not complain, for I shall be punished as I deserve."

"You would really alarm me if I did not know you as I do. But my friendship is of the solid kind."

"I told you that I found the mother and child on the ship. I was very angry, and reproached her for having deceived me. She did not even attempt to defend herself, but told me that *'what was to be, was to be,'* that it was her pleasure, and added that she would kill herself with her child rather than return to her husband. And I am sure that she would have done so."

"It would have been difficult to return to Hâvre," remarked Souscarrière, with a touch of irony, "as you were on the open sea, and people don't get out of a ship as though it were an omnibus."

"The die was cast; I obeyed my destiny. During the voyage, which was a long one, for we were on board a sailing vessel, she explained her plans with the same tranquillity as though she had been doing the most natural thing in the world. She had settled in her own mind that I should adopt her daughter as mine, that the secret of her birth should be hidden from the child, that she should assume my name, be married under it, and become my heiress."

"Madame Yvrande must have had vague ideas as to the law."

"I agreed to everything. The war of secession had just broken out in the United States. Communication with Europe was about to be cut off, and I hoped that we should be forgotten, that the husband would not look for his wife or would become weary of searching for her."

"In a word, you entered into her absurd plans. Your head as well as your heart must have been very greatly affected; still I have always found you about as easy to deal with as an iron bar is easy to bend."

"I was crazy, literally crazy. Would you believe me that this child, who did not belong to me, and who constantly reminded me of the sad state of things which now existed, became the object of my warm affection? She was at an age at which the mind awakens. She was just learning to talk, and her mother made her say my name."

"This is a revelation to me. I never knew that you could like children. I am more and more surprised at every word you utter. Come to the arrival in Louisiana. I am anxious to know how it is that Mademoiselle Yvrande is alive—she is a young lady now, of course."

"At New Orleans I did not wish to stay at the same hotel as her mother, in order the better to throw the husband off the track, if, by any chance, he found out where we had gone. We intended going separately to my place, which was about a hundred miles from the city, in a deserted part of the country, where no one would think of following us. Clara needed rest, and I had to prepare everything for receiving her. My overseer, whom I had apprised that I was coming, had let me know of a hotel where he usually put up, and I took a room next to his. He was a very devoted and reliable man. I told him my plans. He undertook to see Clara every day and to bring her to my estate. Two days after I had gone there, my overseer came to tell me that Madame Yvrande was down with the yellow fever, and that there was little hope of her life. I went to her at once. I hope you may never see so terrible a sight as met my eyes. She was dying. She begged me to remove her daughter, but this was not necessary, for the yellow fever always spares children. I did as she asked me, however, and I removed the nurse and child. I then returned to Clara, who saw death approaching her with rare courage. She had but one thought, but one wish—that her daughter might escape from her husband's search. She imagined, poor woman! that he would revenge himself upon the child for his wife's conduct. 'Swear to me,' she repeated over and over again, 'that you will never leave her, swear to me that you will be a father to her——'"

"Strange!" muttered Souscarrière, who was beginning to divine the probable outcome of the count's story. "But you had not much time to think of all this, as the child fell ill."

"The mother died after sixty hours' frightful suffering," resumed

Maugars, whose voice trembled with emotion. "I did not leave her until it was all over. The people in the hotel supposed that I was a passenger whom she had met on board ship, and who took an interest in her, without being a relative or even a friend of hers. They did not know my real name, and I had said that I was going to Texas on a business matter, and that I should remain but a short time in New Orleans. They were not surprised therefore when I went away. I was not in a fit state to attend to the funeral, for I was wild with grief. What was I to do with the child? I could not take it to its father, or venture to send it across the Atlantic, with no one but the negress who was its nurse. So I adopted the little girl, and I called her Madeleine."

"Madeleine!" cried Souscarrière.

"Yes. Can't you guess that Madeleine, whom we all love, and whom you have known as my child——"

"Is Frédéric's daughter?"

"Yes, the daughter of the man who has so odiously avenged himself."

"Upon her! upon his own child!"

"Yes. Now I have told you everything. You can judge me, and if you cannot exonerate me I shall not murmur."

"I cannot justify you," said Souscarrière. "You blush yourself for your acts. But you have been so cruelly punished that I have not the courage to reproach you. We had better consult together how to repair the sad consequences of your errors."

"I have still to tell you that I went with the child to my residence in Louisiana, and that I had all Clara's belongings sent to Monsieur Yvrande. It was supposed that the child had died, and was afterwards buried with her mother. The overseer sent the box of clothes to France, and took such precautions that, later on, when the husband came to find out for himself all about his wife and child, he was unable to discover anything. I was a hundred miles from New Orleans by that time, and no one could even tell him that I had been in that city for a few days, for no one knew my real name, and, moreover, my overseer himself had fallen ill and died of the fever."

"Yvrande returned without learning anything as to the child. I know that. How did you find out that he went to New Orleans?"

"It was so stated in a newspaper, which poetised the story as to greatly change it. It was given as the adventure of a Frenchman who, when he arrived in Louisiana, hoping to find his wife and child, found nothing but their graves."

"Frédéric told me that he could not even find out where they were buried."

"My overseer was not alive, and could not tell him; and I could not write to him myself."

"For he would then have demanded satisfaction, and you would also have been forced to give his daughter up to him."

"In keeping Madeleine I was fulfilling the dying wish of a woman whom I had adored, and I was firmly convinced that if I gave up the child the outraged husband would revenge himself upon her. Besides, I already loved the child. People talk of the 'voice of the blood,' but I was so fond of the child which was not akin to me that I would rather have suffered myself to be killed than have allowed her to be taken from me."

"It is nevertheless true that she was not your daughter, and that it was a most unscrupulous act to take her from her own father."

"I don't deny that, and I deserve all the sorrow which Heaven has sent me. Only, I pity Madeleine."

"She is indeed to be pitied."

"I have nothing more to tell. I remained on my estate. My negroes did not rebel, nor did my plantation suffer much from the war. I remained for six months in a kind of savage isolation, which accorded with my grief. I determined never to return to Europe, or even to refined life. I condemned myself to exile, keeping the child with me, and for many years, for had I returned with Madeleine and her nurse to France Monsieur Yvrande might have met and recognised them."

"You returned at last, however."

"Yes, long years afterwards; when Madeleine had grown up and so altered that there was no danger of recognition, I determined to return to Paris. I had nothing to live for but Madeleine, and I might have lost her in the climate of Louisiana. Besides, I remembered our old friendship, and knew that I should find a brother in you. I hoped that you would not persist in remaining in Anjou."

"My dear friend, La Bretèche is not a lively spot, but one is at least beyond catastrophes and the stormy events of life there. You would have done much better to have lived near my place than to have come to the very city where you risked meeting the man whom you had wronged."

"I made inquiries about him when I arrived here, and was told that he had left Paris long before. No one knew what had become of him."

"He returned to Mauritius, and thence went to India, where he remained for years. He only returned to Paris a few months before the war of 1870."

"Under the name of Frédoc, I suppose?"

"Yes. He went to live where he now resides, in the same suite of rooms."

"He lived near me, and I might have met him."

"He was in the church on the day of the wedding."

"In the church? That is strange! There was a person there who knew his real name, and who might have been recognised by him."

"Who was that?"

"Madeleine's nurse."

"What! is she still alive and in Paris?"

"I had forgotten to tell you that after Madame Yvrande's death I took the nurse with me. I could not abandon her. She idolised the child. Besides, had I sent her back to France she would have encountered her former master, most likely, and he would have discovered my whereabouts."

"Why, then, did you bring her here with you?"

"I brought her against my will. I wished to leave her on the plantation, but she obstinately refused to remain. She was greatly attached to Madeleine, and it seemed as if the separation would kill her."

"But, as she is here, how is it that I have never seen her?"

"I see her myself as seldom as possible. She is a strange creature. Her love for Madeleine is mingled with a kind of fetishism. She is superstitious to the last degree, and believes in sorcery, fatality, and other absurdities. She imagines that if Madeleine ever found her own father that she—the nurse—would die. It is on that account that she has kept the secret of the poor girl's birth so faithfully."

"It is true that if she had so chosen she might have told your daughter everything."

"I am sure that she has told her nothing. But I have always feared that some indiscreet whim might come upon her. She sometimes regrets what she did in leaving her first master, and believes that if he found her he could send her to the galleys."

"He might give her trouble. I am surprised that during the ten years that Frédoc has lived in Paris, he has never met her, face to face, in the street."

"Oh, I took care, for that matter, to send her to live at Montmartre. She resides in a little place which I rent for her, and I think that she tells fortunes to all the servants around. She might leave that foolish business if she chose, for I make her an ample allowance. She scarcely ever goes out, and we see her but twice a year—on Madeleine's birthday and on her own."

"But you say that she was at the wedding ceremony?"

"Yes. Madeleine wished it, although she is not very fond of the crazy old creature, who frightens her with her exaggerated demonstrations of affection. I now regret having allowed her to go to the church, since Frédoc was there. But she did not see him, for she would have told me at once, and she has never shown her face here a single time since—if I remember rightly—last December. She will probably come on Madeleine's birthday, on the 22nd of July, but we shall, I hope, be far away by then."

"No matter. The presence of this woman in Paris is dangerous, for she may meet Monsieur Yvrande, and you hardly care, I presume, that he should hear from her all she could tell him if she pleased."

"No, for he would reclaim his daughter, and I would rather die than give her up. But I forgot to ask you how he knew that I eloped with his wife."

"Through some letters which he found in a casket with a secret drawer."

"She asked me to give her back those very letters after a quarrel which we had together, and which was followed only too soon by a reconciliation. The casket was sent back by my overseer."

"Women ought to burn their letters. But let us think no more of the past. What course do you intend to pursue as regards Frédoc? I understand that you cannot expose yourself to the risk of killing Madeleine's father; and you are right in saying that he ought to be sacred to myself also, and to my nephew, and even to your son-in-law. But the position in which you now find yourself is simply an intolerable one."

"The only way to get out of it is to fly with Madeleine."

"There is another, a bolder and more dangerous course, perhaps, but a far more honourable one. It is to tell Frédoc the truth."

M. de Maugars started, but hung his head.

"He would blush for his own conduct," resumed Souscarrière, "and he would beg forgiveness of the poor girl whom he has persecuted."

"He would require that she should follow him. No, never!—I cannot do this."

"You forget that he has no longer any right over her. She is Madame Estelan, and her husband will not give her up to Frédoc any more than he would to you. Besides, you have legally adopted her."

"He would not hesitate at creating a scandal, and there would be such a 'celebrated case' as Paris would never forget. I should be disgraced as he was."

"You ill judge this man who has pursued you with so much hate. I have had an opportunity of understanding him better, and I feel sure that he would pursue a different course. If he found his daughter again—as he is exasperated against you chiefly on account of his daughter—he would not forget what you had done for her. But you are not obliged to look at the matter as I do, and you are the master of your own actions. Whatever you may resolve upon, I will help you in it."

"Then you are still my friend?" said M. de Maugars, who was greatly agitated.

"What would friendship amount to if it gave way at trying moments? No, I shan't desert you, Maugars, after being your friend for so many long years."

Maugars pressed the hand which Souscarrière offered him, and rose to hide the tears standing in his eyes.

"Thanks," he said, quietly; "I shall take courage again if you stand by me. And I rely upon you. I shall do whatever you advise."

"Then," said Souscarrière, "I advise you to reflect, for it is not easy to solve this problem. If you said to Frédoc that Madeleine is his daughter he would cease persecuting her, and blush for having driven her to despair. Let us talk about Madeleine. She is placed between a father whom she knows nothing of, and one who is very dear to her. I believe that her heart and intellect will guide her better than our advice. I should leave her entirely free, if I were in your place. Whether she wishes to go with you or with her husband, I should respect her wishes. And if, owing to some accident which we cannot foresee, Monsieur Yvrande should come to claim his daughter, I should call Madeleine, tell her everything, and bid her choose between you."

As M. de Maugars, lost in bitter thought, did not reply, Souscarrière took up his hat and turned to leave the room, adding: "Take time to think over what I say. I am going to call on my nephew, who is now about to enlist. He longs to go away, as he is obliged to keep aloof from Madeleine. I must keep him to his resolution."

VII.

AUBIJOUX had fully decided upon going to Mexico. He had told Estelan of this serious decision, and he had now only to put it into execution. But when a man has a large commercial house he cannot start for the New World in the same way as a dandy sets out for Trouville when he gets up from his dinner at the Café Anglais.

Jean Aubijoux, however, was an expeditious man, and, in former times, when he had often started off without letting people know where he was going, his preparations had not required much time; but then he had known when he would return, and did not think of abandoning his vast enterprises. Now, however, he was about to leave France without any intention of returning, and a year would not have sufficed to wind up his affairs. He had, therefore, given up the idea of doing so himself.

Since his domestic sorrows money-matters had become unimportant to him. He did not care whether he sacrificed several millions or not, provided he could speedily leave France. So he confided to his friend Le Pailleur the difficult task of liquidating his commercial affairs, merely reserving what regarded Madame Aubijoux as his own personal task.

In marrying her he had settled six hundred thousand francs upon her, which money, however, was not in her possession. He wished to remit this sum to her, so as to have nothing more to do with her respecting money matters, but he did not intend that she should inherit his fortune, and to keep it from her he was obliged to make a new will, for he had formerly made his entire wealth over to her by a document which had been in the hands of Prunevaux at the time the notary bolted.

He had no time to lose in taking his precautions, for fear of sudden death, as his duel with Busserolles had been finally arranged, after considerable demur on the part of Madame Aubijoux's lover. The latter's wound had healed, and as he was now on his legs again the date and place of meeting were settled.

They were to fight in the park of the villa on the Boulevard Montmorency, so that the duel might be as little talked of as possible; a useless precaution, however, for the strange arrangement had been made by Le Pailleur and Girac, and the story was known everywhere. The two seconds were altogether inexperienced.

Bantru had declined acting as Busserolles' second, and no one would take his place except the careless Girac, who would have done as much for anybody without caring whether he was right or wrong. Aubijoux had relied upon Frédoc and Estelan, but he was obliged to find other seconds, owing to a grave and unforeseen accident, for Frédoc's confession, transmitted by Souscarrière to Estelan, had changed the face of matters.

Frédoc had become the common enemy, and when Aubijoux learned what he had done to injure Estelan he despised him as much as he had formerly esteemed him. Estelan wanted to call Frédoc out, and, therefore, he was not free. Only Le Pailleur remained to Aubijoux, and he had agreed to be his second, although he had never stood in a similar position before.

It would have been hard to say which one of the three friends was the most occupied. Estelan was running after Frédoc, and had not yet succeeded in finding him, for Frédoc had shut himself up and denied his door to every one since Souscarrière's tempestuous visit. Le Pailleur, on his side, was interviewing Girac, who lived in the Rue Boissy d'Anglas, or else hurrying to the Marais, where Madame Aubijoux lived in her father's house. Le Pailleur had not entirely condemned his friend's wife. He often saw her, unknown to Aubijoux; listened to what she said in her own justification, and did not yet despair of reconciling the couple who had so suddenly parted. Aubijoux, who went after no one, passed his days in his office busily regulating some law affairs, which he alone could settle, and which he did not wish to leave undecided, should he fall in the duel with Busserolles.

On the day after the final explanations between the principal actors in this family drama, the financier had gone very early to his place of business on the Boulevard Poissonnière. He had seen a number of persons who had private business with him, and had conversed with half a dozen merchants, three brokers, and M. Prunevaux's head clerk, now the successor of the departed notary. Aubijoux then thought himself free, but at this moment an office-boy made his appearance and said that M. Marius Guénégaud would like to speak with him.

Aubijoux had almost forgotten the former clerk of Rangouze, the extortioner. He had given him a thousand francs, the price agreed upon with him for the important service rendered to Louis Vallouris. And he

had promised him something more : a good situation in a shipping company. Marius had almost a right to this, since his former employer had been arrested, and Aubijoux gave orders that he should be admitted. "I am glad to see you," he said, pointing to a chair. "Tell me what I can do for you, but tell me quickly, for my moments are precious."

Marius had seated himself timidly, and was twirling his hat in his hands with an embarrassed air. He was not at home as he had been at the *Café de Commerce*, when he was talking to Jean Tiboulén, the second mate of the "*Cazamance*," for whom M. Aubijoux had passed himself off. He was ill at ease in the formal-looking office where there was no such thing as punch at hand, and the stiff bearing of the financier intimidated him greatly.

"I know that I am under obligations to you," resumed M. Aubijoux, "and I shall keep my word. But I spoke of a situation at a port, and I am about to resign my post on the shipping company which would have taken you on my recommendation. It would be easier for me to reward you in some other way. Shall I give you an amount that will enable you to begin some respectable business?"

"I don't care much for the situation," replied Guénégaud, who was beginning to feel less abashed. "Office-life does not suit me, and I can understand that you should hesitate to give me a confidential post after I have been concerned in the disgraceful affairs of that scamp Rascailon. I shall accept anything you offer me."

Aubijoux put his hand into his pocket to take out his pocketbook.

"But it was not to remind you of your promise that I called to-day," resumed Guénégaud, stopping him by a gesture; "you gave me a thousand francs, and that was full pay."

Aubijoux had not expected so much disinterestedness, and he began to look at Marius with interest.

"I do not consider that I have repaid you," he said slowly. "Louis Vallouris, who is my friend, owes his liberty to you."

"The fact is that without me he would still, perhaps, be in the lock-up. Without me, that is to say, and Colonel Souscarrière, who caught Rascailon making off with his money-bag. We caught him together. But I owe you a great deal more than that. It is, thanks to you, that I am not carrying on a bad business, which might have landed me at Mazas; I owe it to you that all my annoying debts are paid, and I have lived for two weeks like a millionaire. So it is really I who am in your debt, and I don't wish to remain so. I am going to pay up."

"Explain yourself. I don't fully understand you."

"I hesitate to do so. I am afraid of making you angry in my wish to serve you."

"I understand less than before," drily replied Aubijoux, who began to mistrust Marius on account of all these preliminaries.

"The question is very delicate," resumed Guénégaud, with hesitation. "You will probably think that I am meddling with what does not concern me. But I have heard things which I wish to tell you in your interest. If they annoy you, you can recall your promise and turn me out of your office. So much the worse for me!—but I shall have done my duty."

"Speak out, then!"

"Very well. I must first tell you that since I became so rich, thanks to you, I have been having a good time of it. I have been idling

about in Paris and in the country, and I have come across a great many people."

Aubijoux made an impatient gesture.

"What I now say is to explain to you how it was that I found out about a week ago that you had your troubles."

"What troubles?"

"That you are separated from Madame Aubijoux, and are going to fight a duel on her account."

"Who says so?" said Aubijoux, angrily.

"Well, Monsieur Busserolles, for one."

"Did you come here to make merry at my expense?" said the financier, rising suddenly.

"I!" said Marius, without being alarmed. "I respect you as though you were my father, and I would go through fire and water for you. I am only a poor devil, and have not always behaved as I ought, for I was starving, but the devil take me if I don't think that I shall be doing you a service in telling you a conversation which I overheard yesterday. The proof of it is that I know very well that if I make you angry you will turn me adrift."

This was said with such frankness that Aubijoux made up his mind to sit down and hear all that his visitor had to say.

"You are surprised that I should know Monsieur Busserolles," resumed Guénégand. "It isn't because I have ever had any business with him. He is a steady young man, it appears, and does not go to money-lenders. But Rascaillon, when I was his 'man of straw,' pointed him out to me once at the theatre. Rascaillon was trying to lend him money at twenty-five per cent., and had his eye on him. He sometimes gave me tickets for the play, but not for my own pleasure, the scamp! He would take a corner box and slip in and hide himself, and then point out to me the different men of his club who were there. He would say, 'That one is worth so much, and that one so much.' It was a regular review, so as to make me acquainted with his different customers."

"Make haste! make haste!"

"I am coming to the point. Yesterday, at seven o'clock, I was sitting in the Champs Elysées and smoking a cigar while waiting for the opening of a concert, where I wanted to finish my evening, when I saw this Monsieur Busserolles come along with his arm in a sling. He had another swell with him named Girac, whom Rascaillon had also pointed out to me, telling me not to lend him any money without consulting him. Rascaillon had some friends to whom he would not have lent a halfpenny, though he sent them to me to make them think him obliging. My chair was on the side of the walk, close to a big tree. Busserolles and Girac took seats near the same tree, but on the other side. They did not know me, or were they aware that I knew them. So they talked of their affairs very openly."

"And mentioned my name?"

"Oh yes, right away! Monsieur Busserolles said: 'It is rather too much, I must say, to have to fight with this man Aubijoux simply because I took his wife home from the theatre.'"

After saying these significant words, Marius stopped short, and his eyes questioned M. Aubijoux's to see whether he ought to go on or not.

"Proceed!" said the financier, with an effort, and Marius, re-assured, resumed: "Girac remarked that there was no way of getting out of the

M. Le Pailleur met him in the passage, but did not remark such an unimportant visitor. He looked careworn and appeared to be agitated also, and the news he brought must have been impatiently waited for, as M. Aubijoux exclaimed at once: "Well?"

"Well, my friend," replied his devoted friend and unobtrusive partner, "I have come to tell you that the duel cannot take place in the park."

"No matter about that. But, after all, why shouldn't we fight as was agreed? My adversary was satisfied with the place."

"In the first place, Estelan, who came to see me this morning, remarked that in case of death or a serious wound the seconds would be blamed for doing differently from what is the custom; the authorities would probably interfere, and if only for that reason the duel ought to take place in Belgium. But there is another reason."

"What is it? Does Monsieur Busserolles decline to fight?"

"You know that he consented to do so very reluctantly. He declared that you were abundantly avenged by having had a shot at him, and that he was not called upon to stand your fire again. His reasoning, it must be said, is not bad. But, on his friends' advice, he gave it up."

"Well, what then?"

"Well, the secret of our arrangements has been betrayed. Some one has informed a person who ought to have heard nothing of it, and by letter. She has been told that you and Busserolles intend to fight on the day after to-morrow, at five o'clock in the morning, at the end of the avenue of plane-trees at the corner of the park; and she knows that your adversary and his seconds will go in by the little gate."

"To whom was this letter addressed?"

"To your wife."

"Have you seen her?" said Aubijoux, suddenly rising.

"I have just seen her at her father's house. She showed me the letter."

"She does not know who wrote it, does she?"

"No; but I believe that it was Busserolles."

"My wife must know her lover's writing."

"You are wrong to speak so," said Le Pailleur. "That young man has never been your wife's lover save in intention."

"Why do you say this?"

"Because I believe that this man, who does not care to risk his life against yours, has informed your wife, in the hope that she will prevent the duel."

"You see that he communicates with her. He probably writes to her every day."

"That is false, and if he did his letters would be sent back unopened. He does not wish to fight. On my soul I believe that you have exaggerated the whole matter. I admit that your wife has been very frivolous, and that you are not obliged to believe what I say, but I assure you that she has but one wish--and that is to be reconciled to you. I do not think that you ought to refuse. It rests with you," resumed Madame Aubijoux's defender, "to decide as to your wife's future."

"What do you advise me to do?" asked the husband, abruptly.

"If you ask my advice, is it because you mean to follow it or to go against it? I do not like to discuss so delicate a question."

"Are you not my only friend? Your advice would be of weight."

"Then I will give it. In your place, my dear Jean, I should not act as though nothing had occurred, but I should not for ever banish my wife

from my heart and home. She has offered to go to a convent in Ireland; but if you took her with you to Mexico, you would, in my opinion, act far more wisely than in accepting any such expiation for mere frivolity, which is all that she has been guilty of. You could remain a couple of years abroad, during which she would share your joys and sorrows, your cares and perils, and you could teach her that Heaven has not sent us into the world merely to enjoy ourselves, and that true happiness lies in virtue and discretion. In one word, I should make her a companion instead of merely worshipping her as an idol. You have always done the very reverse of this, but there is still time to try my plan."

"Do you think that she could content herself with such a life?"

"You will see. You can make an attempt, at least. If she again begins to crave for the excitement of Paris and regrets fancy balls, Chantilly races, and six-thousand franc dresses, then there will be no hope of a reform on her part, and you can only send her back. You would then be exactly where you are now as regards her. But I don't believe that there is the slightest danger of such a result. I have seen her, and heard what she has to say in her own defence. I have seen her weep, and I can answer for a change in her feelings and her views of life. You can try the experiment, and you have yet the chance of being happy. I promised to take your answer to her. If you refuse, she will leave to-morrow for the Irish convent."

"Is she at her father's house?"

"No, not so far off, but she anxiously expects me."

"Where is she waiting?"

"In a cab at your door."

"She is there, and you did not tell me!" exclaimed Aubijoux, very much disturbed. "Come! I wish to see her, and tell her——"

"That you are going to take her with you to America!" interrupted Le Pailleur. "I knew very well that you would not be pitiless, and I swear that you will never repent of having forgiven her."

VIII.

ANTONIA was now the happiest of all imaginable grasshoppers. But there is no such thing as perfect felicity in this world; and Antonia had a mother, but such a mother! Madame Moucheron was the widow of a poor clerk, whom she had ruined by her extravagance. On his demise she had acquired a passion for gambling, and now she was totally absorbed by a fatal fondness for roulette.

Antonia had spent her infancy in German kursaals, and her girlhood at the casino of Saxon-les-Bains. At an age when most girls learn their catechism she was learning the language of croupiers. And since her separation from her mother, who had always beaten her when the "martingale" failed, she had invariably sent her a part of her earnings as a singer. Madame Moucheron on her side as invariably lost these sums at the gaming table.

The amounts varied, according to the Grasshopper's salary, and to what kind of engagement she had. When Prunevaux invested his clients' money in the theatrical venture, she had sent thousands, instead of hundreds, of francs to Monaco. But the old gambler, her mother, vainly endeavoured to perfect her wonderful martingale; she always lost, and finally ended by not having a penny left.

Thus it was that one fine morning Madame Moucheron—better known at Monaco, the “Trente et Quarante” capital, as Mother Olympe—arrived at the house where her daughter rented a handsome suite of rooms, and which was in the Avenue de Messine, as the reader already knows. The old woman now began to pass her time in perfecting her famous “system” with haricot beans instead of gold coins, and did not annoy her daughter when the latter ran about with Rio-Tinto in search of amusement.

But the pursuit of pleasure cannot be carried on indefinitely, and one day Antonia fell ill. She lost her usual liveliness, and no longer laughed or sang. Her spirits left her, as well as her appetite. Terrible pains in the head kept her in her room all day and night, in an invalid chair, and these pains, which she had at first made light of, were beginning to alarm her.

The physician who attended her did not give his opinion, but the way in which he shook his head after each visit did not indicate any very favourable view of the case. He ordered absolute rest, and this did not suit the Grasshopper at all, for she needed excitement at all times, and wished to charm the Brazilian.

He was very attentive, calling every evening after dinner before it was time to take up the cards at the club. He sent heaps of flowers and early fruits, but the bouquets increased Antonia’s headache, and the Montreuil peaches and the Fontainebleau grapes did not tempt her appetite in the least.

As her malady increased, her visitors began to desert her. Escandecal had run away after the failure of “Zairette.” He feared that the prima donna might ask to investigate his accounts. Other acquaintances abstained from calling; some from fear of intruding, and others because they did not know whether her illness was contagious or not. A rumour went about that the Grasshopper was seriously ill, and that she would never spread her wings again. Métel had called once, and had entertained her with his chat on theatrical matters, but he had not reappeared; Zélie, the faithful Zélie herself had vanished, having an engagement to sing during the seaside-season at the Casino of Dieppe. Rosine contented herself with asking after her young friend at the door, from time to time, and so poor Antonia found herself reduced to the society of her maid.

Her mother was not far off, and certainly lavished her affection upon her every morning. But Widow Moucheron was chiefly engrossed in showing the advantages of her “system” to some old women who, like herself, were fond of gambling, and whom she had met by chance in Paris. She held receptions, so to speak, in Antonia’s boudoir, hung with yellow silk. One could see there various ruined baronesses and other gamblers of the female sex, who lacked the money to try their skilful mathematical combinations at the card-table, and whose indescribable attire would have tempted a realistic artist to sketch them at once.

The poor Grasshopper grew no better. On the contrary, she felt intense pains all over her body. Her skin became red and blotchy; it seemed to her, at times, that her face was swollen, and that her head weighed a hundred pounds. Without knowing it, the unfortunate girl had all the symptoms of small-pox.

She had, at times, a feeling of remorse for having utterly wasted her life, together with visions of the gloomiest character. She, who had never cared for the morrow, now began to reflect on death, and she one day

asked her maid if she thought that she could have what is called in Paris "a white funeral," although she had during several years lived so gay a life.*

One day she made up her mind that she would never recover if she contented herself with the advice of a regular physician, and the next thing she did was to consult a clairvoyant—a course which her superstitious old mother greatly approved of.

She began by sending for a female quack, and then wrote two letters, in accordance with an idea which was now constantly before her mind, and which few light-minded creatures like herself would have had.

She had reflected a great deal since she had fallen ill, and had repented of her reckless behaviour. She did not altogether regret the gaieties of the past, but she realised that she had, in point of fact, caused the ruin of Prunevaux, and his flight. She remembered the conversation which she had had with Souscarrière in front of the Café de la Paix, and she thought of the Count de Maugars reduced to poverty by the notary's dishonesty. She said to herself that, if she died of the illness from which she was suffering, it would plead her cause with Heaven if she at least refunded a part of the six hundred thousand francs which Prunevaux had for her sake invested in the operetta business.

She wished to speak to Frédoc of a plan she had formed for doing this, for she had great respect for that old friend of hers. He was disinterested, she thought, and so one of the two letters she wrote was addressed to him. It asked him to come to see her as soon as possible, and, to induce him to do so, she said that she wished to speak to him of matters relating to Prunevaux. In point of fact, Frédoc was especially anxious that no one who had ever dealt with Prunevaux should restore any money to Maugars, and he naturally believed that if the notary had any money left him the Grasshopper must know of it. She, of course, was not at all aware of Frédoc's revengeful feelings towards Maugars.

Before restoring the money which was still in her hands, Antonia wished to question another person. She wondered whether M. de Maugars would accept any money refunded by a singer, or, indeed, by any woman. She vaguely remembered that the colonel had declared that he would refuse to take it from her. She had—poor girl!—but vague ideas as to what a gentleman would or ought to do in such a case. She had thought of addressing herself to Souscarrière himself, but she feared that he would now refuse to visit her. Besides, she was afraid of him. His rough manners intimidated her, and she felt ill at ease when he fixed his large, light-coloured eyes upon her face, and seemed to be reading her very heart, however gay she might appear. Guy de Bautru was livelier and more obliging than his uncle, and so, at the same time that Antonia wrote to Frédoc she penned a few lines to Souscarrière's nephew to tell him that he would do her a great favour by calling upon her.

Her letter reached Guy at a good time. Ten days before, when everybody still believed that Estelan was dead, he would not have taken the time to console a woman of whom Madeleine's father had just cause to complain. But things had changed. Guy had renounced all hope of marrying the girl he loved, and he thought that before starting for Africa he

* At a "white funeral" the pall, hangings, and decorations of the hearse are white. Such funerals are reserved for young virgins, the various appointments being considered emblematical of purity.—TRANS.

might well give a quarter of an hour to Antonia, who announced that she had something to communicate relative to Prunevaux.

So on the morrow the kind-hearted young fellow presented himself at her door. He met her physician in the reception-room. He was a fashionable doctor, who had a number of patients in the "gay world," and who was well known to all the young men about town.

"What has brought you here, my dear sir?" he asked of Bautru, taking him aside, so that the maid should not hear what he was saying.

"Antonia wrote to me," replied Bautru, much surprised. "She asked me to call on her this morning. She is indisposed, it appears."

"Indisposed! I think you would say so if you saw her. The poor creature has no idea of the danger she is in. She has been ill for some days, already. I thought that she was slightly indisposed; but to-day the nature of her illness is apparent. It is nothing less than a very severe attack of small-pox. The least that can happen will be a permanent disfigurement, but I am afraid that she will not even recover."

"What! so young, too?"

"Youth has nothing to do with it, and I advise you not to go in."

"No matter, I am here——"

"As you please, my dear friend, but don't stay long and don't call again. It would be useless, if you did. She will be delirious soon, and not be able to see out of her eyes."

"But now?"

"She has a high fever, and talks somewhat flightily. If she has anything to tell you, she can still tell it. But, I repeat, don't stay long. It would be very foolish for you to catch her malady, for the sake of gossiping with her. Besides, it will only excite her to talk. Good-bye, my dear friend. I am in a dreadful hurry."

Bautru allowed this "Dr. So-much-the-worse" to depart and questioned the maid, who seemed much less anxious than the doctor, for she said to him: "Oh! how glad my mistress will be to see you, sir. She is with that old black witch, the fortune-teller. But you don't mind that, do you? I shall tell her that you are here."

"I don't care about going in to see her if she has a fortune-teller with her. She ought to have set some other time. I will come back when she is alone."

"Oh, if you go, she will ask who has been here, and she will imagine that you went away because the doctor told you that she is very ill. You have no idea how nervous she is about her illness. And she has a great deal to annoy her just now. Her mother is here, and always has a set of gambling women from Monaco coming to see her. There is nobody with my mistress but me, and your visit will do her a great deal of good."

Bautru hesitated, but he thought it almost cruel to deprive the poor Grasshopper of any diversion from her sad thoughts, and so, in spite of his dislike for all fortune-tellers, and especially black ones, he made up his mind to enter the sick-room.

Antonia, utterly prostrated by weakness, was lying upon the large canopied bedstead which stood in the middle of the room. Her head rested upon a downy pillow, fringed with lace, and she wore a silk dressing-gown, white satin slippers, and grey silk stockings.

The stained glass windows, and the guipure curtains, admitted so little light that Bautru could scarcely see the poor Grasshopper, and he barely distinguished a black form near the bedside before a lacquered table, on

which some spotted cards were spread. As he had no desire to say anything to the sorceress, he stationed himself on the opposite side of the bed, and remained standing, so that Antonia might understand that he did not intend to make a long visit.

The poor girl held out her burning hand to him, and he did not like to refuse to take it.

"You are very kind to have come," she said, "there are so many who have ceased to call. I have altered very much, have I not?"

"Not much," said Bautru; "but the doctor told me just now that he had ordered you to keep perfectly quiet. You ought not to receive any visitors at all."

"Oh, I shall not detain you long, my friend. I only wish to ask your advice."

"Excuse me, my dear Antonia, we are not alone, and I am afraid that——"

"Oh, I don't mind Madame Jérémie at all. She is a very worthy woman, and I have full confidence in her. Besides, she isn't listening to us. She is occupied in laying out the great game, to tell my fortune."

"You consult her, I see."

"Oh, I only ask her about the future. I had her to tell my fortune long ago, and whatever she predicts always comes true."

"I hope that she will find out that you are going to be very lucky. But you wrote to me that you wished to speak to me about Prunevaux. Have you heard from him?"

"Yes, he has written every other day. He loves me more than ever, and he is not doing well where he is."

"Then there is nothing to be looked for from him. He will never pay his creditors."

"He would be glad to do so if he had the money."

"The Count de Maugars will lose everything, then. He loses six hundred thousand francs. It is nearly all that he possessed in the world."

There was a pause. Antonia tossed about and pressed her hands to her aching head. She was suffering very much. Bautru did not look at her, for he now saw two white eyes shining on the opposite side of the bed. The old witch who had been bending over her spotted cards, had raised her head. She was listening, and Bautru looked with curiosity at her black face, surmounted by a Madras handkerchief, wound over her frizzy locks in turban fashion. She looked extremely like a baboon.

"Well, my dear Guy," resumed the Grasshopper, with an effort, "I have an idea. If you wish me to tell you what it is, you must promise not to be vexed."

"Why should I be vexed?"

"Well, perhaps you may think it very bold. Monsieur de Maugars is a nobleman of the old school, and I am only a singer. Perhaps he won't accept."

"Accept what? What do you mean? Do you intend offering your possessions to Monsieur de Maugars?" asked Bautru, laughing.

"No. It would be my duty to do so, and if I found myself once more in the Rue Pigalle with my little rooms at twelve hundred francs, such as I once lived in, I ought not to complain. But I don't wish to make myself out any better than I am, and in my position as a prima-donna I should be like a music-teacher without a piano if I hadn't a handsome suite of rooms. But if I die I shan't need anything."

"You won't die, my dear Grasshopper."

"I can't tell. I hope not, although I am suffering very much. But I should like to make my will."

"That can't do any harm; but I am not a notary, my dear Antonia. I am only a second-rate soldier, and, besides, you have merely to write a few lines on a piece of paper, signed and dated, and it will amount to the same thing as though Prunevaux's successor had drawn up a will for you. But, after all, what is the use of one? There is your mother, who would inherit from you even without a will."

"That is exactly what I don't want to happen, for my mother would lose all the money at cards; before six months she would be a pauper—but if I leave her only an income, an annuity——"

"That would, indeed, be better—if it can be managed. I am not a lawyer, as I said before. But I believe that the law forbids children to disinherit parents."

"Oh, I shan't do that. My idea is to settle three or four thousand francs' income upon her so long as she lives—an income which will be paid to her by the person to whom I shall leave everything I possess."

"I think it might be done, but I should advise you to consult a lawyer."

"That person is the Count de Maugars."

"Are you crazy?"

"No. Everything shall be his, and I wish that——"

"Was it to tell me this that you sent for me? It was useless, then. Can you suppose that the Count de Maugars would accept this money? My dear girl, Prunevaux robbed many others besides him, and supposing that you were called upon to restore what he took—and you are not—it is not to the Count de Maugars that you ought to give it. If only for that reason, he would refuse to accept it."

"That isn't the true reason. I should much prefer you to be perfectly frank with me. Say that he would refuse because he would not like to be the heir of little Grasshopper, the singer."

Guy did not reply, and Antonia understood his silence. Her eyes were filled with tears.

The old witch sat crouching, mute and motionless, and looking at Bantru with profound attention.

"Let us say no more," said the sick woman, sadly. "I should have been glad to repair the harm I have done. I should die happier, and I really fear that I shall not recover. Madame Jérémie has turned up the nine of spades with the queen of hearts three times running, and the queen of hearts is me. Forgive me, my dear Guy, for having troubled you to call, and annoyed you with my foolish ideas. You say right enough that I am crazy. I wished to find out whether Monsieur de Maugars would refuse to accept my legacy, so I wrote to two friends, you and that good Frédoc."

"Frédoc?"

"I begged him to come here to-day. I don't know whether he will do so or not, but why should I ask him now?—he will reply as you have done."

"Listen to me, Antonia," replied Bantru, eagerly, "the man you mention is a wretch, and I refuse to meet him, for if I found myself face to face with him, I should cuff his ears. You must promise me to say nothing to him about this idea of your will."

"I will do as you say, my friend," said the Grasshopper. "But what has he done? I thought that he was your friend."

"Done! Infamous acts! He had a grudge against Monsieur de Maugars, and has had one for twenty years. He waited, to revenge himself, till Mademoiselle Madeleine de Maugars married. Then he gave out that Estelan, her husband, was a robber, and tried to ruin and dishonour the count. He slandered Estelan, and urged Prunevaux to squander the count's money. I tell you that Frédoc is a perfect scoundrel. If you told him that you were going to leave your fortune to the count he would declare on all sides that the count had accepted the arrangement. But I trust that you will say nothing of it to him, for you are a woman of feeling. I am going away now, for I don't wish to give way to my desire to attack this man; I promised my uncle that I would not lay hands upon him. So, good-bye!" added Bautru, rushing to the door which he opened and slammed to as he went out.

He had scarcely noticed that the old witch had risen to her feet and stared at him wildly while he spoke. Antonia had fallen back upon her pillow. The effort which she had made had exhausted her.

"Is what he says true?" asked the fortune-teller.

"What do you mean, Madame Jérémie?" inquired the Grasshopper.

"That the Count de Maugars is ruined?"

"Yes."

"And his son-in-law has been accused of stealing?"

"Yes."

"After his marriage?"

"On his wedding day. He was about to be arrested when he left the church."

"But I did not know that, and yet I was there."

"What! you were at the marriage-mass? Did you know the Count de Maugars, then, or his son-in-law?"

"I knew both of them. Was the son-in-law put in prison?"

"Yes. But not till afterwards. He escaped the first time."

"Then he is still in prison?"

"No, he has been released. He was cleared and declared innocent. But why do you ask all this, Madame Jérémie?"

"Because I wish to know," replied the fortune-teller, curtly. "What was the name of that young man?"

"Guy de Bautru. His uncle is a friend of Monsieur de Maugars."

"Guy de Bautru," repeated Madame Jérémie, who seemed very much excited. "Yes, I remember that last year Madeleine mentioned that name in my hearing——"

"Madeleine, that is Mademoiselle de Maugars, I think. There was a talk of Guy's marrying her, but——"

"And this Frédoc, who did them all this harm—what kind of face has he?"

"He is an old man, who was Bautru's friend and mine, and I cannot believe that he has done what Guy says. If he comes, I shall try to find out all about it."

"Why had he any grudge against the count?" asked the sorceress, who was talking to herself.

"I will find out. Frédoc has confidence in me. He will tell me."

"And you will tell me all?"

"You will hear what he says."

"Will he come here?"

"Perhaps. But my good Madame Jérémie, I am very tired, and I must beg you to tell my fortune at once. I believe in what the cards say."

"You are right. They never lie. They told me that I should see him again, and I did see him. They told me, afterwards, that I should see him again——"

"Who are you talking about? I can scarcely see, my eyes are so dim. Raise the curtains, Madame Jérémie, I beg of you."

The old witch obeyed, going slowly towards the window. She was a negress, bowed with age, and bent almost double. She walked with the help of a cane, like the wicked fairies who persecute the heroines of fairy tales.

"Make haste and come back to your cards; I want to know whether I shall live or die," groaned Antonia.

"Mademoiselle," said the maid, opening the door, "here is Monsieur Frédoc."

"Come in, my friend," replied the Grasshopper, sitting up and speaking in a faint voice. "I was sure that you would come."

It was indeed Frédoc, who advanced with a light step towards the bed, and he looked as smiling as ever, although he was greatly changed since Antonia had last seen him. He was pale, his face had grown thin, his eyes hollow, and his hair was now almost white. However, the expression of his face was the same as before, frank, open, and pleasant. He liked Antonia because she was gay, lively, and rather foolish, and he had known perfectly well what he was doing when he made her acquainted with Prunevaux, the notary.

He had at once made up his mind to call on receiving her note, and he now approached her in the most cordial manner imaginable, and without noticing the old negress, who was engaged in drawing back the curtains, and stood with her back towards him.

"My friend," sighed the luckless Grasshopper, "you find me very ill."

"You do not look so, my dear girl," replied Frédoc. "With this pink wrapper on, you look prettier than ever, and not more than eighteen."

"But look at my complexion. I am spotted like a panther."

"A brown panther! That would be a pretty title for a romantic drama."

"Don't laugh at me; I am really ill. My eyes are swollen. I can scarcely open them, and they were the best feature in my face. Where are the days when I sang at the *Fantaisies Comiques*? It was that theatre that brought me bad luck."

"And bad luck to Prunevaux, too," replied Frédoc, who did not lose sight of the purpose of his visit. "Have you heard from him?"

"Only too often! He is doing very little business at present, but he hopes to open an agency in Brussels."

"I am sorry for him and for the clients he has ruined," replied Frédoc, who now felt more at ease.

"But I did not send to you to talk to you about him," replied Antonia. "I wanted to consult you about an idea of mine."

"Go on, my child!"

"No, it is of no use now. I know what you will say. Bautru, who was here just now, has already told me."

"Bautru! Did you send for him? Has he been here?"

"Yes; he was here about ten minutes ago."

"You told him that you expected me, I suppose?"

"Yes, and he went away very angry. What did I know about your quarrels with him? He told me that you had done——"

"Things which you did not believe, I hope? Monsieur de Bautru is very angry with me because I have a quarrel on hand with one of his friends."

"The Count de Maugars?"

"Did he tell you that?"

"I did not understand what he said, and I am sure you are a good man, whatever he may say—and I am very fond of you. It is not your fault if Prunevaux was extravagant."

As she spoke, Antonia held out both of her hands to Frédoc to make him sit beside her.

"When you came in," she said, "I was having my fortune told, so as to find out whether I should get well or not. I will have yours told, too, to know whether you have any enemies, and whether you will be lucky or not. I was talking about you to Madame Jérémie."

"Who may she be?"

"Didn't you see her when you came in? She is there, at the foot of the bed, behind you." And Antonia added, addressing the black fortune-teller: "What ails you, my dear madame? Are you ill? Is it too warm here? The doctor did not forbid us to open the window."

To say the truth, Madame Jérémie had assumed a very singular position. She had approached most cautiously, and was standing up and clutching hold of one of the columns of the canopy, with her neck stretched out and listening intently. It seemed as though Frédoc's voice attracted her as music attracts a spider. Her lips were parted, showing her white teeth, and she rolled her eyes as if she were extremely frightened.

Frédoc, turning suddenly round, found himself face to face with her, whereupon she uttered a hoarse cry, and made a hasty spring towards the window. "He! it is he!" she muttered, twisting her hands together. "I ought to have known that he would come! The king of spades turned up three times, first deal!"

Frédoc was not less peculiar in his behaviour than the negress. On suddenly seeing this strange creature before him he had broken away from Antonia, who was holding his hands, and had approached the foot of the bed to look more closely at the apparition. When the phantom spoke he started as though he had recognised the voice, and he now went towards the woman before him.

Madame Jérémie leant against the tapestry hangings and extended her arms as if to ward him off. She remained as though nailed to the spot by the fright which paralyzed her. She had drawn back the curtains but a moment before, and the light, bright July sun rays now shone fully over her face, revealing its every feature.

Frédoc approached so near that he almost touched her. He recognised her, undoubtedly, for, turning pale with surprise, he exclaimed: "Aurore!"

"Mercy, master!" muttered the negress, falling upon her knees.

"Wretch! I have found you at last!"

"My friend!" exclaimed Antonia, "you are making some mistake. This is Madame Jérémie, the best woman in the world."

"What have you done with my daughter?" howled Frédoc. "You killed her by stealing her from me!"

And as Aurore, who was now prostrate before him, struck the floor with

her forehead, he caught her up by the neck, lifting her as though she had been a mere feather, and carried her from the room, saying to the frightened Antonia: "Don't stir; I forbid your following me! This woman is a wretch, and I shall treat her as she deserves."

At the same time he pushed the door open with his shoulder, and darted, without releasing his prey, into the drawing-room, where on a memorable occasion Don Manoël's rake had gathered up the last bank-notes belonging to Prunevaux, the notary. Flinging the negress upon a divan, Frédoc then went to bolt the door by which he had entered. The apartment had four doors—like any drawing-room that respects itself—and he went in turn to the other three and secured them in a similar manner. He did not wish to be disturbed in what he was about to do.

While he was taking these alarming precautions Aurore looked at him with terror, but did not attempt to fly. She believed herself to be lost. When her former master went towards her after locking the doors, she again attempted to kneel before him, but he caught hold of her arm and compelled her to rise.

"Stand up," he cried, "stand up and answer me! If you refuse to do so, or if you tell me a falsehood, I will crush you under my foot as I would crush a viper."

If any of the gamblers of the club or "ladies of the lake" who were acquainted with Frédoc could have seen him at this moment they would have thought him perfectly insane. The quiet man who so kindly consoled the young players who lost their money at baccarat, the amiable philosopher, the perfect gentleman, was now behaving like the "villain" of a melodrama, and his lips, which usually smiled, gave vent to threats and curses.

But there was no one to witness his fury. Antonia, stupefied with terror, had tried to stop him by appealing to his pity and his reason; but she was not able to rise and go after him. She had to content herself with ringing for her maid, who made no haste to appear. The negress groaned and uttered inarticulate sounds. From the other side of the thin partition against which stood the divan upon which Frédoc had thrown her, there came a hum of voices and a sharp sound; that of an ivory ball striking against a brass rim. In the yellow boudoir where she held her audiences, the widow Moucheron was working the cylinder of her roulette table under the practised eyes of her old friends, and every stroke told.

"Will you speak?" said Frédoc, roughly shaking the arm of the fortune-teller.

"Question me, master," she replied, in a whining voice; "I will tell you everything."

"How long have you been in Paris?"

"I came here twelve years ago."

"You lie! I should have met you before if that were the case."

"I never go out; my customers come to me. I only came to Mademoiselle Antonia because she was ill."

"Where were you before you came to Paris?"

"Over there, on the other side of the sea."

"At Mauritius? Had you the audacity to return there?"

"No, no! never! When mistress died, I stayed."

"In New Orleans, with him?"

"Yes, with him, with them—on the plantation—far, far away from the city—near a big river."

"You went with him?"

"I was forced to go."

"Wretch that you are! If you had returned to me I might have forgiven you, for you could have told me where she was buried. I wish to know now. You were there when she was carried to the grave?"

"Mistress?—yes, I was there when she was buried."

"You were there when she ran away from me, and stole my daughter from me. You knew that she was flying with her lover. Why didn't you warn me? They paid you to hold your tongue, did they not? I would have made you rich if you had prevented them from committing a crime."

"No—it was not money. I loved mistress—I had been her slave, and I could not resist her wishes, and, besides, I could not leave little Clara."

"I forbid you to utter that name!"

"She was my nursling."

"Did you know that you were killing her by taking her to a country where fever rages?"

"No."

"However, you went with her destroyer. He had my daughter's poor little body thrown into a pauper's grave, and he took you with him."

"Master, if you only knew——"

"Don't attempt to justify yourself! You are an infamous creature. A beast has more feeling than you have shown. He dismissed you, and he was right in doing so."

"He did not dismiss me. I left him when I came to Paris. I was afraid."

"Of what?"

"Of you. I was afraid that I might meet you."

"So you knew, then, that I was alive?"

"Yes; the cards had told me so. He lived in a handsome street, and I thought that you must live there too, and I went away and hid myself in a mean little house at Montmartre."

"And you did not see this man again?"

"Yes, master, I have seen him twice every year, and lately I was at church when Mademoiselle Madeleine was married. I saw you, but you could not see me. I went away before the mass was over."

"To tell Monsieur de Maugars that I was there?"

"No, master, I did not tell him. I have not been to his house since the wedding. He knows nothing about it."

"He knows everything now. I did not let him know until my revenge was satisfied. It is so now. I have revealed myself to him, and when he makes up his mind to fight a duel with me I shall kill him."

"Is it true, then, master, that you have revenged yourself?" asked Aurore, raising her head.

"Who told you so?"

"No one. But just now in the bedroom there was a young man whom Mademoiselle Antonia had sent for. He spoke about you——"

"Yes. I have revenged myself, and I shall do even more."

"It was well as regards him," said the negress, "but why did you revenge yourself upon her?"

"Her!" exclaimed Frédéric. "I did not wish to do so, only I could not reach the father except by striking at the daughter."

"Oh, what have you done, master?" groaned the negress.

"Justice only. I have returned evil for the evil done to me. The child pays the parent's debt,"

"Then the young man spoke the truth? She is unhappy, and you are the cause of it?"

"Her unhappiness will last as long as her life. Her husband has been accused of robbery. He was not guilty either. But I denounced him. It is I who had him thrown into prison as a robber. He has left the prison; but she loves him no longer. She will die of grief, and her father will suffer all that he has made me endure. The accomplice of the Count de Maugars died a miserable death. She expiated her crime. He will expiate his, and I now need only to punish you for helping them both."

"Kill me, master, but spare her!"

"Who? This scoundrel's daughter? He had no pity upon my child; why should I spare his? Spare his? What do I say? It is too late for that. Her fate was decided on the day when she married Estelan. She is bound to him for ever."

"But if he died——"

"She would be free. Why don't you kill him? You must have some poisons from your own country. Give him some venomous drug, and then this Madeleine, whom you brought up, will thank you, and I shall have the pleasure of handing you both over to the judge, who will send you to the galleys or the scaffold," cried Frédoc, carried away by his furious anger.

Aurore, who was looking fixedly at him, did not cast down her eyes. "Master," she said, slowly, "will you believe me when I tell you that you ought to weep rather than rejoice in the sorrow of an innocent girl?"

"Believe you? I? Repent having pursued the coward who stole from me the sole object of my affection, for having punished one of his race? No! I despise him as much as I loathe him, and all the falsehoods you may invent would not make me grieve over the lot of a woman who has the Maugars' blood in her veins."

"What if I told you that she is not his daughter, this poor girl whom you have been persecuting?"

"You would lie if you did say it—just as you lied a moment ago when you pretended that you loved my daughter. How much have you been paid to invent some lie to move me to pity, if I could be taken in by it."

"What if I prove to you that Madeleine is not the count's daughter!"

"You mean to say that he has stolen her somewhere. It isn't true, although that man is certainly capable of any crime. But even if it were true, I should none the less have wounded him to the heart, for he is fond of the girl, and she has always been with him."

"He adores her."

"Then what does it matter whether she be his child or not? I have done quite right. So much the worse for her!"

"But suppose that she were the child of some one you knew, some friend of yours?"

"I have no friends now. Don't attempt to deceive me! Madame d'Estelan is Maugars' daughter, and she will be Estelan's wife to the end of her days. And it is I who have made her so, for it is I who inflicted this punishment upon her. It is horrible, no doubt, but Maugars has been made to suffer, and I don't regret what I have done."

At this moment some one knocked at the door between the rooms, and attempted to open it. A voice called out—"Madame Jérémie! Madame Jérémie! Come quick. Mademoiselle Antonia wants you."

It was the maid who called out in this fashion, and it was easy to guess what had taken place in the adjoining room. Frightened as well as amazed, when the negress was carried away, the Grasshopper had now sent her maid to rescue the old fortune-teller. She had heard the cry of rage which Frédoc had given vent to, and she wondered what would be the end of this strange scene.

"I forbid you to reply," said Frédoc to Aurore.

"My mistress is very ill," called the servant.

"Let me go to her," begged the negress.

"No! you shan't stir."

"Do you mean to kill me here, then?"

"I wish to know what you meant by saying that Madeleine was not that man's daughter."

"So you are beginning to believe that I spoke the truth?"

"I believe that you are in league with Maugars, and that he has paid you to deceive me; and I wish to know how far you will carry your impudence. What story do you mean to invent now?"

"Will you promise to spare me if I answer you?"

"Spare you! Do you imagine that I intend to wring your neck? No, no. We are now in a country where I should be called to account if I carried out such an act of justice, and I wish to be free to finish matters with my enemy. I simply removed you from that woman's room because I didn't wish her to learn who I really was, and who you were. I shall go away when you have answered me, and it is not by killing you that I shall inflict upon you my revenge."

"Why should you kill me? I shall die, and before long too. The cards told me that I should die as soon as the child found her father. That hour has now arrived. I trusted that it would not come so soon, for I never met you. I had seen you once, certainly, and I might have spoken to you; but I fled, for I knew that when you found me I should, in spite of myself, betray the secret which I have kept for eighteen years."

"What secret! Will you explain yourself or not?" shouted Frédoc, in a passion.

"Yes, master, I will, and then you shall do as it pleases you. You were told that your daughter had died of yellow fever; but did you ever ask yourself who had dictated the letter which told you so?"

"Dictated it! The man who signed it had no need of any one's dictation."

"Did you ever see that man?"

"No; for he was dead and buried when I reached New Orleans."

"And you were told that he was a man doing business in the city there. But that was false. He was simply the manager of the Count de Maugars' plantation. When he wrote to you that your daughter was dead, he simply obeyed his master's orders—he wrote a lie!"

"A lie! What are you insinuating now?"

"I say that your child is alive!"

"It is impossible!"

"I swear it by my hopes of heaven."

"Wretch! If this not a falsehood, your conduct is even more infamous than I believed. If my daughter is alive you must know where she is, and for hiding her from me you would deserve to be drawn and quartered, to be roasted over a slow fire. No torture would be too cruel for you."

"Torture me, master, if you choose. I know where she is, and if I

had known where you were, I should have told you everything long ago."

"Where I was, indeed! Why, you saw me on the day when *Maiselle de Maugars* was married. Why didn't you speak to me then? And if you were afraid of speaking to me in the church, what prevented you from coming to my house? You need only have followed me home."

"I was afraid of you."

"But you are not afraid of me now?"

"I am more afraid than ever. But you have declared that you would never cease persecuting one whom you ought to love, and I don't wish you to keep on persecuting her."

"It is upon the Count de Maugars' daughter that I am wreaking my vengeance, and I shall never cease persecuting her, I warn you."

"But she is your own child, *Clara Yvrande*, my nursling. She is only *Maiselle de Maugars* in name."

"What is this you say?"

"The truth. Before mistress died she begged the count not to desert her daughter, and she made him swear that he would not send her back to France."

"And he dared do this!" exclaimed *Frédoc*. "And does she know it? Has she consented to this abominable imposture?"

"No. She knows nothing. Everything has been kept from her. The count threatened me with the most dreadful punishment if I spoke, so I was obliged to be silent. To whom could I tell the truth down there? To *Maiselle*? I should not have had the courage to grieve her. It would have been necessary to tell her what her mother had done. When I returned to France with her, I often felt remorse. The secret seemed to stifle me. I promised myself that I would tell her all when she was married. However, the count mistrusted me and sent me away. He only allows me to see her twice a year. He did not even ask me to go to the wedding; I went there almost unknown to him. I was to go and see *Maiselle* this month; it will be her birthday, and I had then resolved to tell her all."

"But this *Maugars* knows that I am here, and I have been waiting to hear from him. I have challenged him——"

"He will not fight with you. How can he run the risk of killing *Maiselle's* real father?"

Frédoc started. He had been wondering for several days why *Maugars* had not sent an answer to the defiance borne to him by *Souscarrière*. *Aurore's* reply now explained this silence on the part of the count and his friends. And, for the first time since the beginning of his conversation with the negress, *Frédoc* said to himself, "It may be true."

"Question him," resumed *Aurore*. "I know him. He may have been silent, but he is too proud to lie. If he attempted to do so, tell him that I have told you everything, and force him to bring me forward as a witness."

"Will you appear and repeat before him all that you have just told me?"

"Yes, master, all! I hope I may go to perdition if the count dare deny. Why should he deny it? You have had your revenge. He will be revenged upon you by telling you that you have made your own daughter wretched."

"Neither his avowal nor yours will prove that *Maiselle* is my

daughter. You may have plotted all this together to make me undo what I have done."

"You forget, master, that you cannot undo it. You forget that I could not guess that I should meet you here. How could I concert with the count, who has not received me at his house for the last six months? I did not even know that Madeleine had trouble of any kind. If you still doubt me, even after questioning Monsieur de Maugars, question Madeleine herself."

"You told me that she was ignorant of everything."

"She will remember crossing the sea."

"What shall I believe?" muttered Frédoc. "What can I believe?"

"Come with me, master, and you will doubt no longer."

"To the count's house? No, he would not receive me."

"He will receive me, for he is afraid that I might betray him. Come! I will tell him that you know all, and then he will have to confess."

"I do not wish that you should see him alone."

"We will go in together."

"Well, I will do it! But if the count does not receive us, I shan't leave you till we have seen him. I don't intend that you should communicate with him. You shall be a prisoner in my house, and you shall be watched."

"Let us go; I am ready," replied the negress.

Frédoc pushed her before him, unlocked one of the doors, and found Antonia's maid in the dining-room, talking with the widow Moucheron. They called out to him in a loud tone, but he did not condescend to reply, and Aurore suffered herself to be led away without resistance.

"There are some things going on here that don't suit me," said the maid, when they had left the apartments. "I am going to ask to have my wages paid, and then I mean to leave."

"You shan't go; my daughter needs your services," exclaimed the widow.

"Your daughter! She won't need any one for long. She'll die, and you had better go and take care of her yourself. I have only been vaccinated once, and I don't wish to fall ill as well."

At this moment the door of the yellow boudoir opened, and a hoarse voice, that of an aged woman, called out: "Mother Olympe! The zero has come out four times in succession, and the baroness had twenty pence on the first turn! Your bank is broken!"

"I'm coming," replied the inveterate female gambler.

IX.

WHEN Guy de Bautru left poor Antonia, he went straight home. He had a great many things to attend to, as he was going away in a few days. He had to pay all his outstanding debts before leaving for Algiers. Four years of Paris life—bachelor life—and but a month before him ere putting on the uniform of a common soldier!

He had enlisted, and the day for sailing from Marseilles was set. Military authorities do not allow delay. Besides, the volunteer had no wish to miss the boat, and did not regret his decision. But he was very sad, and he preferred to remain in his rooms in the Rue Auber to running about town to amuse himself.

He was not cured of his love, although he had bidden a final adieu to the past, and solitude had become dear to him since it enabled him to think of Madeleine. Determined to keep his promise, he had abstained from seeing her again, but he remained whole days thinking of her in solitude, and this was no way to forget her or console himself. He had also to see his tradespeople and a few acquaintances who owed him money, which he now needed in order to pay his debts. He had to sell his furniture, his horses, and give up his rooms. From the amounts he received he had to refund the money advanced on his farms, for he wished to retain the land which still belonged to him in Anjou. All this took up more time than he could well spare.

Fortunately, Souscarrière had offered to help him from his own pocket, and to attend to various matters for him. He had called his nephew's creditors together at the Grand Hôtel and paid them. He had written to his notary to free the lands, thinking that he could not do better than save them from being sold, and feeling sure that Guy would need the money which his *bric-à-brac* would bring him in.

The good uncle had even arranged to buy the bay which he had ridden every day since his arrival in Paris. He would have regretted that Guy should send it to Tattersalls', where it would not have sold well, for the gigantic old soldier's rides had done the pretty animal no good.

However, Souscarrière would not buy the art objects himself, although his nephew had maintained that the panoplies would decorate the great hall of the manor of La Bretèche to great advantage. Souscarrière did not care for works of art. He had decorated the walls of his abode with a few dozen heads of stags and wild boars, badly stuffed by a naturalist in the neighbourhood, and that sufficed for him. He declared that the famous suit of armour of the time of Henry II. would set the whole neighbourhood talking about him if he set it up on a pedestal in his hall. Besides, he cared less than ever to arrange his patrimonial abode. The plan of living there had been given the go-by, for, let events turn out as they might, his friends could no longer go to Anjou to stay. Madeleine's fate depended upon Estelan, and Maugars' decision was subject to her own. To the father as well as the daughter exile seemed to be the only remaining resource.

The old soldier had thought no more of Guy's marriage, or of grand-nephews and nieces whom he would have jogged upon his knees. Guy could not decently quit the army till he became a captain, and at the usual rate of advancement the ex-colonel might die ten times over and go to a better world before his nephew would be able to marry and settle down. However, the ex-colonel had some thoughts of going with Guy to Algiers, to make him acquainted with some old comrades still in the service, and holding commands in the army of Africa.

For a few days past Souscarrière had been less engrossed with M. de Maugars' affairs, which were coming to a decisive conclusion, and he saw his nephew frequently, so as to keep up his spirits and strengthen him in his good resolutions. He reached the rooms in the Rue Auber but a few moments after Guy's return from his visit to Antonia, and he found the young fellow very much excited. The Grasshopper's overtures had made him angry, and the name of Frédoc, which she had so foolishly brought forward, had set him wild. He knew that Frédoc was Madeleine's persecutor, and he longed to publicly insult him and force him to flight. But his uncle, previously informed of his intentions, had made great efforts to

prevent him from carrying them out. He had even gone so far as to forbid him to provoke Frédoc on any pretext whatever, but without giving any very good reason for this injunction.

The fact is, Souscarrière had deemed it idle to increase his nephew's annoyances by telling him that Madeleine was not the real daughter of the count, but in point of truth the child of their common enemy, and, besides, he had promised to keep to himself the delicate secret he had learnt. However, he had vainly attempted to rid Guy of his anger. The idea of fighting with Frédoc had got into the young fellow's brain on the day when he had learned the bad acts which the spurious old bachelor had committed. It was settled there, and he could not get rid of it. Indeed, it had become a mania.

Souscarrière avoided discussing the matter as well as he could, but he was obliged to submit to hearing it mentioned every now and then, whereupon he gave all sorts of commonplace reasons and false pretexts to deter Guy from challenging Frédoc. He maintained that they both had been intimate with him; that everybody would be surprised by a duel between men who had been friends; that in seeking for the cause of everything which had been said respecting Madeleine's marriage her name would again be brought up, and that to attack Frédoc was striking at Maugars, whose only wish was that his own name might never more be mentioned.

Bautru listened to all these arguments with ill-controlled impatience, and was by no means convinced by them. He would not act against his uncle's will, but he continually endeavoured to make him change his views on the subject. On this particular day he began by asking: "Do you know where I have just been, uncle?"

"I suppose," replied Souscarrière, who had not yet had time to scath himself, "that you have been making some calls."

"Yes, I have been to see Antonia."

"Prunevaux's Delilah? What the mischief took you there?"

"A letter from her, asking me to call."

"That is no excuse for doing so."

"She wrote that she wished to see me about the notary. I thought that she might, perhaps, have been authorised by him to propose some settlement with the people he has robbed."

"Your idea had not common sense to recommend it."

"So I found; but you will never guess what it was that Antonia wished to consult me about."

"Her future as a singer, perhaps?"

"No. I found that she had formed a plan and wished to make her will."

"Is she ill?"

"Very ill. Her physician told me that she has the small-pox."

"Oho! Do you know that it is contagious?"

"Not in a ten minutes' visit. I did not even sit down. I was very angry. She had taken it into her head to leave all she possesses to the Count de Maugars, so as to make up in part for the money which Prunevaux stole from him to hire the theatre for her."

"You told her, of course, that Maugars would refuse at once?"

"Yes; but, unfortunately, she won't be satisfied with consulting me, for she has sent for Frédoc, who is an intimate friend of hers."

"Her thinking of doing this act of reparation shows that she has some sense of justice and more good feeling than I should have expected. But

that fellow Frédoc is quite capable of telling the story everywhere, and declaring that Maugars has accepted the offer of this girl's money."

"Why has not Maugars sent his seconds to Frédoc? I cannot understand his magnanimity."

"You must not sit in judgment upon Maugars. He has his reasons for not fighting."

"The same as yours, most likely. I should very much like to know what they are?"

"Guy, you annoy me! I have already told you that the affairs of older persons than yourself do not concern you."

"But my own affairs do concern me. That man made game of me after a way. He called himself my friend, and laid a villanous trap for me."

"You were foolish enough to be taken in by it, and that is to be regretted very much, but Frédoc did not attack you personally. Go and tell your friends that you wish to fight with a man—especially with a man of his age—because he is the cause of your being in love with a married woman, and just see how they will laugh at you."

"I should find some better pretext than that; but as you don't wish me to fight with him, I will not do so. But will Monsieur d'Estelan abstain from doing so, after being so vilely slandered by Frédoc? He knows that such is the case, and that it was this wretch who denounced him to the police."

"Yes, he knows it, for I told him in the drawing-room at Maugars' house, and, by the way he acted, I think that he will take the duel on his own shoulders."

"He does not seem to be taking any active measures, however."

"I suppose that something must have prevented it, for when he left me he was going straight to Frédoc's rooms. He failed to find him, perhaps."

"But since then he must have succeeded in doing so. A man can always be found if he is well looked for."

"Frédoc may have refused the challenge. I have not seen d'Estelan, and you know that I don't communicate with him. But I won't conceal from you that if he succeeds in making Frédoc fight, I shan't be sorry. What is forbidden to us is not forbidden to him."

"There you go again with your enigmas! Why can Estelan fight with him when we can't?"

"Because he is ignorant of something which is only known to Maugars and to me," replied Souscarrière, impatiently.

"Do you call that answering me?" exclaimed Guy.

"Nephew," replied Souscarrière, "you oblige me to tell you that you ask too many questions. When a man has an uncle who means to leave his money to him, he ought to respect his wishes, deuce take it! and not torment him to make him tell a secret which is not his own."

"A secret! Well, do you suppose that I shouldn't be able to hold my tongue if you told it to me?"

"I don't say that, but I might go too far in telling it. There is one of La Fontaine's fables which you had better read."

"It is called, 'The Woman and the Secret,' but I am not a woman."

"But, to speak seriously, if I told you this secret, would you refuse to reveal it to Madeleine if she should ever question you about it?"

"I shall never see Madeleine again."

"You might, without intending to do so. If I told you what I mean by all this, would you have the courage to hold your tongue?"

"I should, on my word of honour."

"Well, then, *Frédoc is Madeleine's father*. Now, do you understand why it is that Maugars cannot fight with him?"

"I understand that you are making game of me, my dear uncle."

"I am not in the least disposed to do so. What I tell you is, unfortunately the truth. Frédéric's daughter did not die of yellow fever, as he supposed, at the time when—as I told you a few days ago—Maugars eloped with his wife, and she took with her the child and nurse. It is this very child that now bears the count's name. In a word, it is Madeleine. Maugars himself communicated this to me, and it cost him dear to make such a confession. You can't suppose that he would accuse himself of such an act if he had not done it."

"No, for it is a crime."

"The term is harsh. For myself, I don't know what to think about my unlucky friend's action. He can say many things to excuse himself, but he is, nevertheless, in a sorry plight."

"Madeleine is innocent, whatever he may be guilty of," said Bautru, firmly.

"She was not consulted, as you may imagine, being almost a baby at the time, and up to this very day she does not know that Maugars is not her father. I hope that she will never know it, for you will not inform her."

"Not I!—but Frédéric will tell her—he can claim her."

"Frédéric is not aware that she is his daughter. If he had only known it he would not have tortured her as he has done. Now, you are acquainted with the true bearings of the case, and I ask you, could you expose yourself to the risk of killing Frédéric or being killed by him?"

"No," stammered Bautru, "it would be monstrous."

"Very well! We agree upon that point. It is settled, then, that you won't think of this impossible duel any more. None of those who know the truth can fight this man."

"Does Estelan know it?"

"No, very fortunately. And no one will tell him. If he induces Frédéric to answer for his conduct by fighting with him, and any fatal result follows, I have nothing to do with it. We are not called upon to tell him, and the reputation of my old friend is dearer to me than the lives of these two men for whom I care nothing at all. Don't let us talk of them, but of your approaching departure. Have you found any one to take your pottery and panoplies?"

"I think so. Métel knows a gentleman who is fond of these things. But what do I care for a few thousand francs? What troubles me most is poor Madeleine's sorrow."

"Indeed! I thought that you did not trouble yourself any more about her. Remember, she is Frédéric's daughter."

"Is it her fault if her father has done such infamous things?"

"I'll venture to bet that during all these years that Frédéric has been preparing to revenge himself upon Maugars, he has been steadily practising fencing. But Estelan has merely travelled about."

"Do you think that they will fight?"

"I can't tell you, but I know that Estelan wishes to punish Frédéric for his slanders, and has not the faintest idea that he stands in the position of father-in-law towards him. We can only look on and wait."

"Do you think that we should be doing right to let them go upon the duelling-ground?" said Bautru, after a moment's thought.

"How could we prevent them from fighting—can you tell me?" replied Souscarrière. "They will not come to ask our permission."

"But, my dear uncle," replied Bautru, "it would suffice to let them know what you have just confided in me. Frédoc would naturally refuse to fight with his own son-in-law, and Estelan to fight with his wife's father."

"It might be so, but I am not sure, for Estelan has been greatly injured by this man, and he will not forget it merely because he is thus connected with him by marriage. Frédoc will certainly not be stopped by so little. He knows no obstacle. Besides," added Souscarrière, "we cannot betray Maugars' secret. He confided it to me. I have confided it to you, and I am beginning to think that I ought not to have done so. To tell it to others would be dishonourable."

"Will it not be dishonourable to allow these two men, whose death would be advantageous to us, to fight and perhaps kill each other?"

This time it was the uncle who started, for his nephew's plain language, so full of lofty sentiment, startled him by its truthfulness. Guy's disinterestedness touched his feelings; he admired it, although he had not the same scruples as the generous young man had, and although he already regretted having taken him into his confidence as regarded Maugars' past life.

"I admit," he said, "that it would be more chivalrous on your part to detain your rival and prevent him from running the risk of making so great a mistake as, socially speaking, this duel would be. But I don't see how it is to be done, for I promised Maugars to keep his secret."

"He might free you from that promise."

"I shall not ask him to do so. Chivalry is a fine thing, but it will not do to carry it too far. How in the world, even if I were at liberty to do so, could I go to tell Estelan, who execrates me, the true position of his wife? He would not listen to me, or, if he did, he would never believe that Madeleine is not Mademoiselle de Maugars. He would, perhaps, think that I was inventing the story to separate him from his wife, and I cannot imitate Frédoc by informing him through an anonymous letter. The conclusion is this: let us be silent. Things will perhaps turn out differently from what we imagine, and I think that unforeseen conclusions are often those which settle matters to the best advantage."

Bautru did not appear to be satisfied. "I shall do nothing without your authority," said he, "but I swear to you that if Estelan fell I should reproach myself with his death, and refuse to profit by it. Never would I marry his widow."

"But if she became free by accident, or death following upon illness, you need have no scruples."

"No, for I love Madeleine devotedly, and I do not care who may be her father. But this is idle talk. I shall never marry, and before I become a general I shall surely be sent out of existence by some stray ball."

"Don't give way to such ideas, I entreat you! I also felt as you do, and at your age, on account of an unfortunate attachment. I was very wretched, but I have long ago forgotten all those feelings. It is true that I obtained a captaincy, and that I have remained single, but that is a reason the more why you should marry and have a family. When there are no

more Souscarrières there will still be Bantrus. But let us leave all that to Heaven, and think of the present only."

The man-servant in Bautru's employ now entered with Métel's card. "Show him in," said Bautru, and a moment afterwards the journalist's pleasant and intelligent face appeared at the door, and brightened up still more at sight of Souscarrière.

"I am delighted to see you, colonel," he said as he shook hands. "I have an answer for your nephew from the man who wishes to buy his *bric-à-brac*. He is a nice young fellow from the country, who had a letter of introduction to me, and wishes to have some handsomely furnished rooms in town. He offers forty thousand francs for the lot."

"I accept," said Bautru.

"You won't lose much—only a thousand napoleons or so. Delightful!" said Souscarrière, sarcastically.

"Is it really true that you have made up your mind to enlist?" asked Métel.

"I have enlisted already," replied Guy.

"I regret it, as I shall not see you, perhaps, till you return two or three years hence. But I think you are right in going away. Paris is stupid now. Politics sicken me, literature tires me, and news for my paper is as scarce as truffles."

"What!" exclaimed the colonel, "is there no gossip, no scandal?"

"Yes, a little bit. Aubijoux and his wife are reconciled."

"Oho! that surprises me very much. I did not think that he was so forgiving. Last week he was going to kill half Paris, or, at least, so he said."

"He won't kill anybody. The duel is abandoned. Busserolles is not sorry that it is so. It was a mere silly flirtation, and scarcely even that, for the lady was in nowise in love with him. He has gone to Dieppe and taken Girac with him."

"Good-bye to them both, and a good riddance of bad rubbish!" said Souscarrière, who did not care for either of the two clubmen.

"The millionaire of the Boulevard Montmorency is going to Mexico. There will be no more entertainments at the villa. It is for sale. Madame Aubijoux has given up society, and taken a vow to worship Saint Muslin only. Touched to the heart by her reformation, her husband has taken her back, is turning his possessions into ready money, and will take her to a country where society papers are not published, and where there are no dandies to flirt with. They will live like quiet people, and everything will end as it usually does in a fairy tale."

"Why not? Madame Aubijoux was frivolous, but not vicious. Her husband sees that a gay life was bad for her, and the change will do her good, in every way."

"I trust so. Rangouze will be tried at the assize court in three months from now; Antonia's Brazilian talks of returning to his own country, for he says that there is no more play worth mentioning at the club. Old Rosine de Villemoble is looking for a partner to go into the money lending business on Rangouze's plan. And now I have told you all there is to tell. But, by-the-way, colonel, what was the result of your chase the other day? Did you find out anything about the woman with the melon? It was I started that hare; I hope that you caught it."

Souscarrière, who felt greatly relieved that nothing was known, replied: "Oh, yes, I found the scamp who wrote the anonymous letters in

the Rue de la Bienfaisance. He confessed everything. It was a fellow whom Maugars offended once upon a time. I told him what I thought of him. He won't give us any further trouble."

"In the Rue de la Bienfaisance. Why he lives in the same street as Frédoc," remarked Métel, without, however, attaching any special meaning to the observation. "By-the-bye," he resumed, "I met Frédoc just now, in the strangest company you can possibly imagine. He was walking about with a negress. She looked exactly like the she ape at the Jardin des Plantes. I am sure that she would draw crowds if she were on exhibition."

"That's strange! Frédoc is usually so particular. What can he mean by walking about the streets with a black woman? She did not have his arm, did she?"

"No, but they were walking side by side, and appeared to be carrying on a very lively conversation. He was in a state of great excitement; it was easy to see that; he was talking loudly and gesticulating, in fact, behaving just the opposite to his usual habits."

Bautru shrugged his shoulders. He was wondering why his uncle expressed any curiosity about the hateful man in question. He himself had not heard of the existence of a black nurse, who had attended upon Madeleine in her childhood, but Souscarrière remembered even the slightest details of the story told him by Maugars, and he feared it was the same old negress who was now running about Paris with Frédoc.

"They seemed to be going toward the Place de la Trinité," resumed Métel.

This was all that Souscarrière had wished to find out. So taking up his hat and the stout cane which he usually carried, he exclaimed abruptly: "Excuse me, my dear sir, I have an appointment at two o'clock, and I find that I am late already. I leave you with my nephew. Guy, my lad, I advise you to close with the offer for your furniture. It isn't so easy to find a simpleton from the country who wants to buy china and curiosities. If you see him yourself, tell him that the Henri Deux armour was worn by an uncle of yours. That will give him a high idea of your family."

With this jest, the colonel hastily went off. He suspected that Maugars was about to be visited by his enemy, and that he would need his assistance.

X.

THE Avenue de Messine is neither very far from the Place de la Trinité nor very near it. Frédoc was so excited by having met Aurore that it did not occur to him to take a cab to Maugars' house. The drama was approaching its end. The "traitor"—as they say at the *Arbigny*—had no further occasion to conceal himself. He was about to play the fifth act unmasked.

During the walk from Antonia's house to the count's, Frédoc found time to carry on the inquiries begun in the Grasshopper's parlour. The negress, when closely questioned, did not vary her replies. She maintained her previous assertions, and declared that Maugars could not contradict what she said. So, by the time they reached the church where Madeleine was married, Frédoc scarcely felt a doubt as to the truthfulness of Aurore's story.

A complete change was coming over him. His hatred seemed to fall

from his heart, as fruit which is too ripe drops from the tree when shaken by the winds of morning; and once exclusively bent on fierce revenge, he now opened his heart to hope, repentance, and paternal love. He resigned himself to asking pardon of man, if his daughter could be restored to him. And he imagined that he need only say, "Come!" to her, and that she would come. He forgot the obstacles which rose between him and her, the cruelty which he had been guilty of, and even Louis d'Estelan's existence.

At the moment when Métel had met him in the Rue Saint Lazare, walking along with the fortune-teller, he was hurrying as fast as he could to Maugars' house, and he did not perceive the journalist watching his hurried gait and excited gestures.

Métel had gone on without turning, and was able to tell Bautru of this surprising sight. However, if the journalist had not been in so great a hurry he could have told the colonel some more interesting news. But he was already far away when, as Frédoc was crossing the Place de la Trinité, Aurore stopped short and uttered an exclamation in creole dialect.

At the same time she laid one hand upon her former master's arm, and with the other pointed towards the church. Frédoc looked in the direction which she indicated, and twenty paces off he saw Madeleine, leaning on M. de Maugars' arm, and walking slowly past the railing on the left side of the square. She had just left the church, where she had been praying for her foes as well as for her friends.

Frédoc turned pale. He closed his eyes for a moment, and but for his strength of will he would have fainted. Aurore was scarcely any more self-possessed than he was. She seemed about to fly. She had been disposed to brave everything, at first, but her courage was deserting her at sight of M. de Maugars, whom she perhaps feared even more than her old master Yvrande.

Maugars and Madeleine came slowly on without noticing the man and woman standing near the street lamp, and they were about to leave the sidewalk and cross over the way, when Madeleine suddenly recognised her nurse. A mute scene ensued, which did not attract any one's attention, although it was a hundred times more dramatic than many incidents which cause a gaping crowd to gather.

Madeleine, surprised and troubled, with the Count de Maugars startled and enraged, Aurore trembling, and Frédoc hesitating, formed two groups, separated merely by a few yards. The looks which they exchanged expressed anger, fear, and every violent passion and deep emotion.

Drawn towards each other by contrary feelings, it seemed as if they dared not accost one another. It seemed, indeed, as if the count was about to drag Madeleine away, in order to spare her the scene which was likely to ensue. The presence of Aurore standing at Frédoc's side told him what he had to expect.

But Madeleine, who could not divine what was about to happen, and who did not know Frédoc, since she had never seen him from her infancy, detained the count. And then Frédoc was the first to make up his mind to cross the street, to the spot where his enemy awaited him, standing as stiff and upright as an old grenadier awaiting a cavalry charge.

Madeleine's manner was different. She was fond of her nurse to a certain extent, but not over-fond, for the strange creature frightened her with her wild and grotesque ways, and the strange and, to her, inexplicable words which she sometimes uttered. Still she was glad to see her.

Maugars had held her aloof while they were in Louisiana, but Aurore had always contrived to see her nursing every day. Since her return to Paris he had sent her to live at Montmartre, but although Madeleine did not regret her absence she always received her cordially whenever she came to see her.

Aurore now approached just behind her old master, and after pressing Madeleine to her heart, she took her by the hand and led her into the square. Neither the count nor Frédoc attempted to detain her. They knew that she had nothing more to reveal, and they wished to come to an explanation which was destined to be stormy but decisive.

They did not even salute one another, and if Madeleine had turned her head she might have imagined that the gentlemanly-looking man who came up with so little ceremony was one of M. de Maugars' old comrades in the army.

"You know everything, do you not?" asked the count, abruptly.

"This woman has confessed everything, I presume?"

"She has told me a story, which, if it be true, proves that you have committed a crime."

"You do not believe it, then?"

"I believe you quite capable of having stolen my daughter; but I also believe that this woman may have lied; in fact, since you are so well aware of what she has said, she may be in league with you——"

"To try to persuade you that you are the father of a girl whom I dearly love, and who has been my companion for eighteen years, or more? For what motive should I have degraded myself so far as to become the accomplice of an act of imposture?"

"To induce me to doubt. You hope to deter me from carrying out my revenge. You hope that I shall no longer dare to persecute your daughter, because I shall be uncertain whether she is yours or mine."

"It is quite impossible that you can believe a single word of what you are saying. You know very well that I am not afraid of you, and that you have done us all the harm which it is in your power to do."

"You declare that this girl is my daughter, then?"

"You would never have known it if you had not met Aurore; I had taken measures to prevent you from meeting her, but, since you know it now, I deny nothing. Act as you please, and leave me. I do not wish that Madame d'Estelan should remain alone with this negress, as she has betrayed me to you."

"Leave you! Do you think that our interview is over?" exclaimed Frédoc, "and do you imagine that all you have to do is to make an assertion? Do you think that mere assertion is enough for me to believe you? You are mistaken, sir; I require proof."

"Proof?" repeated Maugars, bitterly, "proof? Is there any mark upon your daughter? Do you suppose that things will go on as they do in a play at the theatre, and that you will recognise her from some tattoo marks on her arm? I have no proofs to give you, and I don't mean to furnish you with any. If you prefer to do so, you can believe that Aurore has concocted the story, and stop questioning me. I have nothing to tell you."

"I cannot force you to reply to me, but you cannot prevent me from questioning Madame d'Estelan, and, if I do, I shall not say anything likely to startle her, for you see that my old slave is telling her the whole story at this very moment."

The count hastily turned round, and saw Madeleine seated upon a bench beside the negress, who had dragged her to the farthest corner of the square, and was talking to her excitedly. He realised that she was telling the poor girl the story of her birth, that the time had gone by for secrecy, and that he must finish matters with Frédéric.

"Come," said he, in a deep but clear voice, "I will satisfy you."

Frédéric made no rejoinder, but followed the count into the square down the lonely walk, at the end of which Aurore was seated with Madeleine under an umbrageous tree, in front of the entrance to the church of La Trinité. The fountain beside them was plashing softly, and the scene was more suggestive of harmony than discord.

Suddenly, M. de Maugars turned again to Frédéric and exclaimed: "You ask for proof, but you have it before your eyes. It is more than you need if hatred does not blind you completely. Cannot you understand that if Madame d'Estelan were my daughter I should simply kill you? It is a week since you confessed your infamous conduct to my friend Sous-carrière, and that you told him to challenge me. You do not take me for a coward, I presume? And when you saw that I did not reply to your provocation, you must have wondered why I was so patient. You must have guessed that I had some very strong motives for not fighting with a man whom I hate. Ah! I declare to you that if I had been free, all the blood in your body would not have sufficed to wipe away so many outrageous insults. But I could not cross swords with the father of Madeleine."

"I did not expect such scruples on your part," replied Frédéric, bitterly. "The man who robbed me of my wife ought not to be so squeamish. You have rent my heart, and what can hinder you from driving your sword into my breast? But you prefer to allow your son-in-law to rid you of me. He came to challenge me; searched for me, and is still doing so, and if I avoided him as I did it was only because I was waiting for you."

"Since you dare to speak of Monsieur d'Estelan, whom you have so odiously slandered, you are no doubt aware that he does not know the truth. If he knew it he would content himself with cursing and despising you. But I could not tell him, or did I wish to do so, and, besides, he has not asked my advice. You have made him my enemy, and made your daughter the most unhappy woman in the world. I am trying to take her from her husband, whom you resuscitated, as it were, so as to make her suffer as long as she lives. I shall not succeed in my endeavours, no doubt, and so your infernal purpose will be carried out."

"Do you think that I should not deliver her from him if I were sure of being her father?" replied Frédéric, gloomily.

"You had better murder him as a climax to all the rest, and as for any uncertainty on your part, I don't care to do away with it. You are too intelligent not to discern the truth. When you have admitted to yourself that Madeleine is your daughter, the punishment which your cruelty deserves will begin. But I have a right, now, to ask you if you intend to try to deprive me of her?"

"Did you imagine that I should leave her with you?"

"I defy you to take her back!"

"Why do you so particularly care to keep her, if she is not your daughter?"

"Why? Why do I defend her from you? Because I love her as though she were my own child; because I brought her up, and have lived

solely for her during the last eighteen years. What have you done for Madeleine? You have tortured her. She does not even know you. She is only aware of your crimes and persecution. Do not deceive yourself. She need not bend to your authority."

"I believe what Aurore has said," exclaimed Frédoc at this moment, "and I mean to take my daughter from you."

"You do? Go and claim her from the law, then. I will proclaim what you have done, and I will call upon Estelan to appear. He would be heard, and your other victim also, poor Madeleine herself. I do not know what the law would decide. You would, perhaps, gain the day. But what do I care? Public opinion would absolve me, and you would have one more infamous act to answer for, as Madeleine would rather die than leave me to follow you."

"To follow her own father? You hope, then, that she will refuse to come with me?"

"I am sure of it."

"She will perhaps not dare to do as she wishes, for she is afraid of you, and you will abuse your own authority to influence her decision, but when she is alone with me she will listen to me. I will explain to her that you are alien to her, that you stole her from me, and that my blood flows in her veins, and then she will curse you."

"Try!" exclaimed M. de Maugars, pointing to Madeleine, who was now coming towards them.

Madeleine advanced with a firm step, and her face, although pale with suffering, evinced firm resolve.

She was no longer the mild and timid young girl that she had been before, ignorant of life, and only knowing how to obey and be resigned. Sorrow had developed her mind and changed her character. The coarse revelations of Aurore had opened her eyes, wounded her delicacy, and pained her heart.

Frédoc, who was far more troubled than she was, was about to advance to meet her when M. de Maugars stopped him, clutching tightly hold of his arm. "I forbid you to speak of her mother," he said in a stilled voice.

"Leave me! leave me!" said Frédoc, who felt as though he were about to sink to the ground.

The nearer Madeleine approached, the less courage he had. What should he say to this young girl to induce her to go with him? How, without outraging her pure mind, could he explain everything to her? How could he appeal to her as a father, without falling at her feet to entreat her pardon after causing her so much sorrow? How could he say to her, "I have persecuted you, I have laid abominable snares for you, I denounced your husband, ruined Monsieur de Maugars, drove Guy de Bautru to despair, but you are my daughter; I love you now as much as I hated you before; it is your duty to love me. Another man has educated you, and cared for you. But you must leave him, I am your father."

Madeleine had heard everything that Aurore had to tell, and the latter, who expected that a frightful scene would now follow, stood on one side, not daring either to advance or fly. She was groaning in the most heart-rending manner, and wiping her eyes with a red silk handkerchief.

Some children, who had been playing near by, had now gathered about her, and were looking curiously at her, ready to fly as fast as their legs

could carry them if the strange-looking creature attempted to touch them.

Somewhat surprised to see two well-dressed men talking in such an animated fashion at so early an hour in a part of the square which nurse-maids frequented far more than gentlemen, the keeper of the square was slowly approaching with his hands crossed behind his back.

Frédoc was aware that any outburst of tenderness in such a public place would be improper, that he could not embrace his daughter, or kiss her, or even express to her his feelings on seeing her; and so he greatly regretted having accosted M. de Maugars in the street instead of waiting to speak to him in his own house.

It was Madeleine who curtailed this painful situation by passing in front of Frédéric without raising her eyes, and placing herself near the Count de Maugars, to whom she said, emphasising every word, "Come, father, come!"

"Father!" exclaimed Frédéric, in a tone of grief.

"I know no other father than he," replied the young girl, without faltering.

"Do you not know——"

"I know everything. Come, father!" repeated Madeleine, and she passed her arm through that of the Count de Maugars.

They were turning to leave the square, and the unhappy Frédéric was on the point of trying to stop them, when Souscarrière appeared. He always managed to arrive at critical moments. He had hurried along the Rue Auber as fast as possible, despairing of reaching his friend's house before the negress arrived there with her revelations. But suddenly, just as he was approaching the church of La Trinité, he espied Frédéric and Maugars talking together near the entrance of the square. It was not difficult to understand the situation, and the raging colonel crossed the intervening space with a few strides, and came up at the very moment when Madeleine had declared herself in favour of the Count de Maugars, and had taken his arm to lead him off.

"Stop, sir!" called out Souscarrière to Frédéric, placing himself before him, "you can settle these matters with me. You," addressing the count, who appeared disinclined to go off, "had better go home with Madame d'Estelan. I will come to you later on."

The count still hesitated. He evidently did not wish to yield. But Madeleine firmly drew him away, and Frédéric was not tempted to follow them.

"We are alone now," said the colonel. "Don't explain. It isn't necessary. I see how things are. That savage creature writhing on the bench over there is the nurse. I fear that Madeleine will die of sorrow with all this. Her situation is simply dreadful."

"I will change it," said Frédéric. "I will deliver her and make reparation for everything."

"I defy you to change her position. In France marriage is indissoluble. Madeleine is bound to a man whom she does not love."

"We are going to fight, and I shall kill him."

"You don't mean to assassinate him, do you? He must be more skilful than you are in the use of arms, and it is more likely that he would kill you. I sincerely hope he may. You have yourself to blame for placing your daughter in his power. Even if she were a widow, her lost happiness would not return to her; and, besides, she will not go to you. How

could she think of living with the man who killed her husband? Moreover, it is altogether unlikely that Monsieur d'Estelan would consent to fight his own father-in-law, and he will be informed that Madeleine is your daughter. She will tell him herself, or, if he does not hear of it from her, he will hear of it from my nephew. What are your intentions after all that has occurred to-day?"

"I intend to take my daughter back."

"In spite of herself? You dare not."

"She has not been able to express her will."

"She did very clearly express it, and she did not consult any one before doing so. I saw it all. Monsieur de Maugars was not beside her, and you certainly won't undertake to say that she obeyed the dictates of that old witch. The negress would no doubt have advised her to go with you, as she has acted very ill as regards you, and is probably very much afraid of you. But Madeleine has no need of advice from you or any one. The choice was not doubtful between you and Monsieur de Maugars. You are her father—that is unfortunately true—and she owes you her life, a sorry gift. But you have not brought her up. It is no fault of hers if her mother took her away from you."

"You cannot justify the conduct of your friend."

"I am not called upon to do so; but I declare that he was influenced by noble feelings in keeping Madeleine with him, and she herself will not reproach him for having brought her up as Mademoiselle de Maugars, for becoming attached to her, and giving up all else for her sake. He has sacrificed everything to her comfort, made a will in her favour, and given her a dowry. She would have been his heiress if your friend Prunevaux had not robbed him of all he possessed. It is not his fault if she is not the happiest woman in the world. Without your interference she would have been so. Monsieur d'Estelan suited her very well. She would have become attached to him, and she was already pleased with him. You alone are to blame for all the disgrace which visited that poor young fellow; and by dishonouring Madeleine's husband, by ruining her adoptive father, and laying a plot to cause her to become attached to Guy de Bautru, you have made her utterly wretched."

"Does she know all that has occurred?"

"She shall know it all, and in fact she knows a good deal already. It is our duty to tell her what you are. Do you think that you merely have to say to her: 'I am your father,' to make her forget all that you have done to injure her and her friends? You imagine, then, that she will abandon her benefactor to throw herself in the arms of her persecutor?"

"Enough! sir, enough! Don't you see what I am suffering?" replied Frédoe.

Souscarrière, whose eyes were fixed upon Madeleine's father, was struck by the great change in his features, and realised that he had made the desired impression. The enemy, overcome with grief, was now about to surrender.

"Do you understand," resumed the old soldier, "that although it is allowable for a man to punish an offence it is forbidden for him to have recourse to cunning, calumny, and all low means? You are not a coward, as I well know, but you have acted as cowards do. Heaven is just. Your unworthy acts have recoiled upon yourself. Your daughter refuses to acknowledge you as her father, and you have only yourself to accuse of all these misfortunes."

"You talk of cunning and dissimulation," muttered Frédoc. "Was the Count de Maugars frank and open? Has he not been lying for eighteen years? Had he but eloped with my wife, and committed no more than that bad act, I could have called him out, and obtained the satisfaction due to me. But what kind of conduct do you call the stealing of my daughter? And if he brought her up in obedience to the prayers of a dying woman, he need not have called her by another name than that which legally belonged to her, or have kept her from me while I was mourning her as dead."

"He looked for you everywhere, but as you had assumed a false name he failed to find you."

"He did not seek for me to restore her to me, but to prevent me from legally claiming her in case I discovered that she was mine. You reproach me for having revenged myself as I have done. I swear to you that had Monsieur de Maugars come to me and said: 'Here is your daughter. I have brought her up and loved her as though she had been mine. She is ignorant that you are her father. Do you wish to tell her the lamentable secret of her birth at the risk of making her blush for her own mother?' I swear to you that then I should have been at a loss to reply, and that I should have been disposed to forgive."

"The question still stands as it did. Is it your firm determination to claim Madeleine, and compel her to recognise the right which nature has given you over her?"

"No," replied Frédoc, "I do not wish to force her to do so. I only think of restoring to her the happiness which she has lost, and then I shall be glad to die. Farewell, sir. I shall probably never see you again. I do not ask you to esteem me; I only ask you to pity me."

Souscarrière would have been pleased had he been able to find a reply to these last words, but he could say nothing. He felt greatly moved, but made no attempt to prevent Frédoc from joining the negress who had not dared to go away, although she expected nothing pleasant from her former master.

XI.

LOUIS D'ESTELAN had given no sign of life since that last interview with his wife—which Souscarrière had interrupted. Neither Madeleine nor Maugars, neither Bautru nor the colonel knew anything about him. Madeleine naturally thought a great deal of her husband, but she never mentioned his name. The count had asked Souscarrière to make inquiries, which had not proved successful, however. Estelan had no acquaintances in Paris. Even Métel failed to discover his whereabouts. Souscarrière thought of asking Guénégaud to try and find out something about him, but Rangouze's ex-clerk had not yet called on the colonel to receive the promised reward for helping to capture the usurer. Guy's uncle did not care to inquire through the police, as to the abode or doings of the Count de Maugars' son-in-law, and he shrank from applying to Aubijoux, who had just been reconciled to his wife, and who was not likely to relish being disturbed.

The result of all this uncertainty was that Madeleine's position remained as painful as before. She and her adoptive father lived in constant anxiety and suspense, being utterly ignorant of the intentions of either Estelan or Frédoc.

Would the former claim his wife? Would the latter claim his daughter? Had they agreed together to wrest her from her adoptive parent, or were they as antagonistic as ever, and would they settle their private quarrel without heeding the most interested person?

Now that Madeleine knew what undeserved sorrows had fallen upon her husband, she no longer thought of leaving the country without his sanction. She felt that her duty required her to obey the man whom she had unknowingly wronged so seriously. However, her feelings respecting her real father were not the same. She could not hesitate between Frédoc and Maugars, but she lamented the fate which obliged her to make a choice, and regretted the lot of the lonely man who had persecuted her. She wept day and night, waiting to know her fate as a condemned man waits for a reprieve or the order to mount the scaffold.

The count tried to prevail upon her to leave Paris. He represented to her that she was running a serious risk which it depended upon herself to avoid; that there is a limit to human resignation and patience. It was enough, he said, that she should have declared her willingness to submit. Her husband had no right to leave her in a state of doubt. Whether he claimed her or renounced her he ought to explain his intentions. She was not bound to await his good pleasure and remain for an indefinite period with the sword of Damocles above her head.

Besides, everything seemingly indicated that Estelan had come to the wisest conclusion, and would not reappear again, now or ever. He had realised that his wife's heart had changed, and instead of reclaiming her with the police behind him he had preferred to act like a gentleman and retire without a word. By disappearing he had probably wished to show Madeleine that he gave her back her freedom.

She however did not like this kind of reasoning. She persisted in asserting that her duty lay before her, that she belonged to the man whose name she bore, and that he was the master of her fate. Souscarrière had, to a certain extent, upheld her in this view of the matter, and his opinion had prevailed. The count consented to postpone the intended departure on board the Saint Nazaire steamer, on which he had already taken passage for Madeleine and himself; and the colonel started for Anjou to spend a week there in settling various private matters in order.

Frédoc had not been seen since the scene on the Place de la Trinité. Aurore, the negress, had disappeared from her home at Montmartre, while as for Bautru, who had abandoned his former gay companions, he spent a solitary life pending his departure for Algiers. Through delicacy, he abstained from any kind of intercourse with M. de Maugars, just as he had abstained, by his uncle's advice, from any overtures or connection with Madeleine's husband. He had lost his gaiety, and his health was beginning to fail him. He was keeping his room at the time of Souscarrière's departure for Anjou, but his indisposition did not appear to be serious, and he had himself persuaded his uncle to set off.

Maugars and Madeleine now tried to convince themselves that Estelan had left Paris, and that Frédoc, in despair, would do the same. They were wrong, however. Frédoc was thinking of anything but exile, and Estelan, whom Souscarrière had sought for everywhere, had all this time been living near the Place de la Trinité. He might, if he had cared, have still occupied the chalet which M. Aubijoux had placed at his disposal, but he would have found himself much less free in his movements,

and so he had simply withdrawn to his old apartments in the Rue de Rome, wisely concluding that no one would look for him there.

This suite of rooms, which he had hired and furnished just before his marriage, recalled to him the catastrophe which had followed it. However, he had taken possession of it once more, to the utter astonishment of the doorkeeper, who had heard of his mishaps, and who had no idea that he should ever see him again.

Estelan lived here alone, served only by a housekeeper, who came to prepare his repasts; and he had not received a single visitor, excepting M. Aubijoux, the one faithful friend and confidant of his plans and sorrows. It was evident that Madeleine's husband could not long live such a life, and indeed his isolation would have proved unbearable had he not been looking for the wretch to whom all his sufferings were due. On calling upon Frédoc he had been told that his enemy was seriously ill, and that the doctor had forbidden him to receive any visitors. Estelan had thereupon written a threatening letter, declaring that he would box Frédoc's ears in the public street if he refused to give him satisfaction by fighting a duel. The note had remained unanswered, and Estelan was thinking of posting a man at Frédoc's door with instructions to let him know when he left the house and where he went, when one day he received a call from a person whom he did not expect.

It was a strangely-attired negress. Madeleine's husband thought at first that she must be mistaken, and had meant to call upon some one else, but, without waiting to be questioned, the woman told him that she had brought him a letter from M. Frédoc. Estelan started on hearing this name. However, he was glad to hear from his enemy at last, so he asked for the letter, which, he concluded, would contain a reply to his challenge, and appoint the place of meeting, together with the day and hour.

"I must speak to you before I give you the note," said the negress.

This reply and this assumption of authority surprised Estelan, but he would have accepted even more annoying conditions to know what the long-delayed epistle of his enemy contained. So he ushered the sable messenger into his sitting room.

"You are in Monsieur Frédoc's service, I presume?" he said to his strange visitor.

"No," she muttered, looking at him with strange fixity.

"Who are you?"

"My name is Aurore."

"Your name tells me nothing. Do you know me?"

"I have seen you before, but you have never seen me."

"Why did not Monsieur Frédoc come here himself?"

"He is ill, very ill."

"What, still! He has been pretending to be ill for a long time."

"He took to his bed again yesterday, and he may never rise from it again."

"I can't guess why he sent you to me if that is the case. However, give me the letter. I have no time to lose."

Aurore hesitated a moment and then, drawing a folded paper from her bosom, she held it out to Estelan, who hastily opened it and read as follows:—"Sir,—I have long avoided you and refused to see you. I knew that you had come to demand satisfaction from me, and I considered that I ought to give the first place to Monsieur de Maugars. Now, however, I am free; Monsieur de Maugars withdraws. But I am kept at

home by a very serious illness, and I have things to tell you which I have not the strength to write. It is absolutely necessary that you should know how we stand as regards one another, and that I should know what you intend to do after you have heard what there is to reveal. I am not aware whether you will consent to come to me. However, the woman who is the bearer of this note will tell you everything and will bring me your reply. You may rely upon the truth of what she tells you, and you may speak to her without reserve. She has an interest in keeping these secrets. You will not doubt it when you hear what part she has played in a story which interests us both."

Estelan, who was but little enlightened by this enigmatical letter, looked inquiringly at the negress.

"I am Madeleine's nurse," she said, without any further preamble.

"You!" exclaimed Estelan.

"Yes, I. I never left her during the first ten years of her life, and I returned to France with her."

"How is it that I never met you at Monsieur de Maugars' house, then?"

"He sent me away."

"Why?"

"He was afraid of me. I knew too much. I might have spoken out, he thought. But he was mistaken. I was too fond of Madeleine to injure her by an imprudent word. And it was because I was sent away that the secret became known."

"What secret?"

"The secret of her birth. Madeleine is not the daughter of Monsieur de Maugars."

"You lie! The man who told you to tell me this falsehood, and who sent you here, is Monsieur Frédoc."

"The man whom you have just named is Madeleine's father. I swear that I am telling the truth. I was there when the count took the child. If you don't believe me, question the count and question Colonel Sous-carrière. Madeleine also knows the truth, and has known it for some days. She was with the count when she met her father."

"And has she gone away with the wretch who persecuted her, and who has driven us all to despair?"

"When he persecuted her he did not know that she was his own daughter; but now he, also, is in despair. Madeleine told him that she would never leave the Count de Maugars."

"She did well."

"You approve of her decision, then?"

"Yes, I approve of it. Frédoc is a monster. I don't yet realise why he sent you here. He does not imagine, I suppose, that I shall take sides with him again Monsieur de Maugars?"

"He sent me here to tell you that even if he recovers he cannot fight with Madeleine's husband."

"I should refuse to fight with him if it were proved to me that he is really her father. The impossibility of such a duel is obvious, so it is idle to point it out to me. But your visit has some other purpose."

"Yes. Monsieur Frédoc wishes to know whether you intend to take Madeleine back with you."

"How dare he ask me that, after having calumniated me so basely?"

✓ "He repents of having done so, and relies on you alone."

"To make his daughter happy?" asked Louis Vallouris, ironically.

"Yes," replied Aurore, without flinching, "to make her happy by separating from her."

The negress showed extraordinary assurance, and her frankness resembled impudence. Estelan, who closely studied her, was struck by the rudeness of her replies. It seemed to him as if she had pushed him to the wall and summoned him to surrender. And, with her wild look, she appeared like some black Judith appealing to Holofernes before cutting off his head. Aurore, indeed, had the tone and manner of a fanatic. The humble fortune-teller was transfigured, and Antonia would not have known her. The meeting with Frédoc had caused this miraculous change. She had since lived in the constant society of her former master, and having succeeded in obtaining forgiveness for the past, she had begun to espouse his quarrels and take part in his designs.

Frédoc had just decided to fight with Estelan, if needs be, when he had fallen seriously ill, his malady becoming so serious that he was obliged to take to his bed. His physician had told him that it would be as much as his life was worth to venture out, and had added that the least imprudence would kill him. Frédoc had meantime returned to more humane feelings. For the first time, he thought of humbling himself before the man whom he had made to suffer, of interceding for Madeleine with him, and of appealing to his feelings of generosity. He had, indeed, conceived the almost senseless project of obtaining from Estelan the renunciation of his wife. He hoped that the injured husband would carry self-abnegation so far as to exile himself, and leave her free as to the disposal of her heart. He imagined that Estelan would freely expose himself once more to a life of perilous adventure in Mexico, and hoped that he would meet his death there; he thought, indeed, that divorce might in the meantime become legal in France, and that Madeleine might profit by the new law to marry Guy de Bautru. And, if Estelan only listened to his request and came to his bedside, he did not despair of obtaining from him a promise to grant his dying prayer.

It was with ideas like these that Frédoc had written the letter that Estelan had just read, which letter he had confided to Aurore instead of Brigitte, for the latter never having had aught to do with his private misfortunes, had been but the passive instrument of his revenge. She had written the anonymous letters he had dictated; she had carried them to the post-office, or thrown them into a newspaper-box, but she had never had any clear idea of her master's dark designs, and had kept to her own special occupation of doling out alms.

Aurore, on the contrary, had espoused with sombre ardour the cause of the man whom she had formerly betrayed. She hoped to serve Madeleine by serving him, and she cared little whether Maugars, whom she did not like, was pleased or not. As for Estelan, she looked upon him as an enemy.

She was capable of speaking with fire and even eloquence of her old master's feelings. The profession of fortune-telling which she had plied for ten years had made her tongue nimble and her mind cunning. On other occasions she would have been a very fitting ambassadress, no doubt, but the chance which had suddenly taken her from the usual routine of her life had over-excited her brain and awakened her savage instincts. She had entered Estelan's rooms as an executioner might have entered the cell of some condemned criminal, and not like a priest sent to quiet or convert him.

"So you have been sent, then," said Madeleine's husband, crossing his arms and looking at Aurore, "you have been sent to ask me to give up my right to my wife?"

"No," replied the negress, "to find out whether you are disposed to give her up or not."

"Well, then, go and tell your master that I refuse to reply to the question."

"Admit that you have resolved to compel Madeleine to go with you."

"I shall not tell you one way or the other. But I will write to Monsieur Frédoc. When you give him my letter you can tell him that I refuse to hold any further communication of any kind with him."

Estelan was about to write a short and decisive note to this effect when some one rang at the door.

"Go in there," he said to Aurore, pushing her into the adjoining bedroom, the door of which was open. "You can leave in another moment, and you must never come here again."

The negress entered the bedroom as she was bidden, and seated herself near a pier-table.

It was M. Aubijoux who had rung the bell. Estelan, who was delighted to see him, ushered him into the sitting-room, and said to him:

"Allow me to write a few lines. A letter has just been handed to me, and the bearer is waiting for the answer."

"Who is she?" asked Aubijoux, who was sitting with his back towards the bedroom, but who could see the figure of Aurore reflected in a mirror.

"She was sent to me by Monsieur Frédoc," said Estelan.

"What, did he dare send any one to you?"

"He dares do anything. But I am going to bring the matter to an end."

Aubijoux made no further remark, but remained watching the movements of the negress in the looking-glass. His scrutiny was all the more edifying as Aurore had no idea whatever that everything she did was reflected in the mirror.

Estelan wrote rapidly, and nothing but the scratching of his pen upon the paper was heard amid the silence of the thickly-curtained room. But suddenly a cry made him raise his head, and turning round he saw that the financier had darted into the bedroom and seized hold of Aurore's arm. He ran in.

"Wretch!" exclaimed Aubijoux at this moment, "I saw what you were doing! What did you throw into that glass? Was it poison?"

The negress still held a small box, the contents of which she had thrown into a glass of water which stood on the pier-table.

"I?—nothing," she rejoined, in a hoarse voice.

"You lie! that white powder in the glass is arsenic. Your master has hired you to poison my friend."

Disengaging herself with a sudden effort, Aurore exclaimed: "I forbid you to accuse my master. I swear before Heaven that he did not order me to deliver Madeleine by killing her husband. I would not lie at such a moment. It is I who am about to die. The cards predicted it—my master will die, too, but he, Monsieur d'Estelan, will live, for Madeleine's misfortune—it is written!"

"The woman is crazy!" said Estelan.

"It is, you who are crazy," said the negress, "you take powdered

sugar for arsenic. Do you think that I would drink this water if I had put poison into it?" And with a gesture as rapid as lightning she snatched hold of the glass and swallowed its contents in an instant.

"Where is the letter?" she said, with frightful calmness. "Give it to me at once. I have no more time to wait."

"The letter?" exclaimed Estelan. "There is no letter. I shall not write to your master at all."

"Very well," muttered the negress, "I shall tell him what I have heard and what I have done. Farewell! I am going away to die." And she left the room with a firm step.

Aubijoux and Estelan allowed her to depart.

"She wished to poison you," said the financier. "That powder was arsenic. She found that I had seen her, and knew I should inform against her, so to escape the punishment she deserved she swallowed the poison meant for you."

"I can scarcely believe that she has had the courage to do so," rejoined the astonished Estelan.

"I don't doubt it. I know the blacks. I have known them to strangle themselves by turning their tongues back, in order to do their owners a bad turn, and I have known others to die for their masters' sake. This woman must have formerly been Frédoc's slave. He told her that he wished you were out of the way, and she took that for an order to kill you."

"Perhaps so. Frédoc must desire my death."

"That would avert the necessity of fighting with you and risking his own life. You wished to make him fight, and——"

"You are mistaken, my friend. He had but one word to say to prevent a duel between us. Madeleine is his daughter."

"How is that? What is this you tell me?"

"I am repeating what the negress herself told me. She swears that Monsieur de Maugars brought up Madeleine as his own daughter. I had no time to find out more."

"Did he adopt her in Louisiana?"

"Yes, or so I suppose. But be it as it may, I am tired of the life I am leading here. It sickens me, all this, and I think it idle to struggle any longer against my fate. Monsieur de Maugars, Frédoc, Colonel Sous-carrière, and Monsieur de Bautru all hate me. Madeleine must hate me also. I have no friend in the world but you, and you are going away."

"Would you yield to them? Would you give up your wife?"

"Did you not advise me to do so? On the evening when I was set at liberty we sat in your park together, and you said to me: 'Do as I do: forget the unfaithful one.' I was tempted to follow your advice. Do you remember?"

"I remember it, and I also recall the fact that that odious Frédoc advised the very reverse."

"True. It seems to me that I can hear him now, uttering his dry, sharp, cynical remarks."

"You listened to him. He urged you to carry your rights to the utmost extent. He declared that pity would reduce you to the part of a dupe, and that women consider kindness to be weakness. 'A man is a fool to love a woman or to forgive her,' he said. I have forgiven my wife, however, and I do not regret it."

"Do you think that I have not forgiven mine? Heaven is my witness,

that if she had returned to me, I should never have alluded to the past."

"She did not refuse to come to you."

"No, but she talked of 'duty,' and promised to 'obey,' me. I should have preferred a refusal to that. I lack the courage to endure such torture any longer. I have no strength left for the struggle. One thought alone sustained me, so far. I hoped that I should be able to punish the wretch who has done so much harm to her, to myself, and to Maugars. I hoped that I should be able to say to Madeleine: 'I have avenged you,' and now it turns out that this man is her own father! And I am obliged to respect him! It is too much, my friend! I confess myself conquered, and I withdraw from the contest."

"Without seeing her or telling her what a sacrifice you are making!"

"If I saw her, I am not sure whether I should have the courage to go away, for I love her more than ever, and it is because I love her that I no longer desire to force my love upon her."

"You ought to try to gain her heart once more," said M. Aubijoux.

"I should not succeed," replied Estelan, "and the attempt would give me too much pain. Monsieur de Maugars wishes to take her to America. I shall allow him to do so."

"If you voluntarily abandon the authority which the law gives you over her, you will appear to her as you really are. She will admit that you have noble feelings and a lofty soul, and that the only reproach that can be addressed to you is that you are, unhappily, her husband. She will realise that she has wrongly given way to an infatuation for a man who is not what you are."

"You forget that he will still be in the most advantageous position. He, too, is sacrificed. As soon as he found that this abominable Frédéric had deceived him, he ceased visiting Madeleine, and his uncle told me that he was going to enlist."

"Yes; I know that he has behaved honourably. But he has only done his duty, no more. He has not suffered as you will suffer by giving up your wife. He is not yet twenty-five years old. He has never thought of anything but pleasure; he is seriously in love for the first time, and has life before him, and all its mirages, hopes, and ambitions, with all the allurements which no longer deceive you whom ten years of labour and sorrow have deprived of all illusions. You have even more experience and sense than I have, although I am so much the elder; and, after all your hard life in the past, you fancied that you had attained to happiness. You cannot go back and begin life over again, but Bautru still has existence before him."

"A woman does not weigh the pros and cons impartially, or decide in favour of the most deserving," replied Louis Vallouris, sadly. "What does it matter to her that I lose more than Monsieur de Bautru will lose? She loves him and she does not love me."

"She loved you once," eagerly replied Aubijoux, "and you have not become less worthy of her although events have separated you from her. No, although women are not impartial judges they always sympathise with those who suffer. Your wife is not insensible to your sufferings and misfortunes. It is because Frédéric believed her to be the Count de Maugars' daughter that you were denounced, calumniated, and imprisoned. She knows that your sorrows come, in a manner, from her. If she did not pity you for your undeserved martyrdom she would be a monster, and you

told me yourself that she was as tender and as loving as a woman can be."

Estelan remained for some moments without replying. He was greatly agitated, and it was easy to see that what his friend had said had made a deep impression upon him.

"Heaven grant that you may not be mistaken," he eventually answered, shaking his head, "and that she may appreciate what I am about to do, for I have resolved to leave her free. I do not rely upon this act to cause any change in my destiny. I am not immolating myself to create an effect. I am yielding to feelings which you will understand, to my friendship for you and to the horror I feel of Frédoc. If he is really Madeleine's father, he will, of necessity, enter into her life, and I do not wish to breathe the same air as that man."

"Do not say 'man,' say *rascal*! He has sent you a hireling to poison you. The proof of the crime is there, and if I were sure that you would support me I would give the infamous creature who has just left this room into the hands of the police."

"What good would that do? If it were really poison that she prepared for me she will die of it. And if Frédoc be her accomplice, I would not denounce him out of pity for Madeleine. Let him live, execrated by Monsieur de Maugars and despised by his own daughter. I abandon him to his remorse. We will go away together, my friend, and I shall have courage enough to avoid seeing Madeleine before leaving. It will be enough for her to know of the resolution I have taken."

"By a letter sent to her by you?"

"No. I could not express what I feel. Another person shall inform her."

"Who?"

"Guy de Bautru."

"Your rival? Your enemy?"

"He is a loyal enemy, and will understand why I act as I do."

"Take care! that is a dangerous step."

"No. Monsieur de Bautru did not wait for me to decide before ceasing his visits. He has given me the example of self-renunciation, and has done so without any underhand motives. I have no cause to reproach him. He shall hear me say: 'I am going away. Inform Monsieur de Maugars of my decision. If I have chosen you as my messenger it is because I have faith in your honour, and know you to be incapable of a base action. I rely upon your keeping your promise to your uncle and not trying to recall yourself to the recollection of her you love. Be sure that I shall keep my promise, and shall end my days far from the woman who loves me no longer.' When I have said all this, Monsieur de Bautru will not refuse to deliver my message to Monsieur de Maugars, and he will go to Algiers as surely as I shall go to Mexico."

"Yes," replied Aubijoux, "I believe him to be a man of feeling. His uncle is like him in that. I never thought that Monsieur de Bautru was like the fast men with whom he associated. But if I were in your place I don't know whether I should have the courage to see him."

"I need less courage to see him than to see Madeleine," replied Estelan. "I have made up my mind, and so that I may not be tempted to falter, I shall go to see Monsieur de Bautru this very day. To-morrow I shall be myself again, and nothing will prevent my going away with you."

"I approve of your decision, if that be the case," exclaimed Aubijoux;

"we will put the ocean between us and those who have harmed you so much. And I hope that you will never regret having shaken the dust of the old world from your feet. All roads lead to happiness. You will, perhaps, reach it by the longest of them."

XII.

UNCLE SOUSCARRIÈRE had a pleasant trip to Anjou, and everything went well with him while away.

After he had left, a short letter from the count told him that things remained in the same state as before; that Estelan had not reappeared, and that Frédoc had made no sign. The count added that he was alarmed about Madeleine. She remained so silent, asked no questions, and maintained a passive attitude which exasperated him. He wished she would boldly give utterance to her thoughts as to her unworthy parent and her annoying husband, but not a word did she say. She was evidently waiting, sad and resigned, for the fiat of fate. Maugars furthermore stated that he had no news of Guy, and that he thought it best not to call upon him, as he well realised why the young fellow did not show himself. He thought it quite unnecessary, however, that Guy should keep entirely away from his house.

Souscarrière had not written in reply, having nothing of interest to communicate. He preferred to keep his consolations till he met Maugars and Madeleine again. He reached Paris one morning at five o'clock, quite ignorant of what had been going on for the last few days. Although he was not in the habit of giving way to anxiety, he was very desirous of seeing his friends again. He had made up his mind to call upon Aubijoux at once, to ask him to ascertain Estelan's plans. Even if Aubijoux refused to do this, he could not, at all events, decline to state where Madeleine's husband was.

Thus prepared for a "campaign," as he called it, Souscarrière set out to execute his new programme, which was to begin by a friendly chat with Guy. He was glad to find himself in sight of the Rue Aubert, and quickened his footsteps as he mounted it. After crossing the Rue Scribe, at a hundred paces from the house where Guy lived, he espied through a tavern window a familiar face, that of Marius Guénégaud, absorbed in his usual occupation of "killing the worm," as he called it, by swallowing absinthe and water on an empty stomach. The meeting was fortunate, and the occasion for inquiry too good to be lost. So Souscarrière went up to the tavern door, holding his cane like a gun, and curling his moustache.

Guénégaud recognised him and came forward at once. "I salute you, colonel," he said, raising his hand to his felt hat. "May I venture to ask how you find yourself, and how you have been getting on since I had the honour of executing your orders on the road from Bougival to Paris?"

"I am very well," said Souscarrière; "but where the deuce have you been since that expedition which you managed so ably? I told you to call on me at the Grand Hôtel. I wanted to thank you and reward you."

"No need of that, colonel! I don't deserve any thanks for helping to arrest a scoundrel, and as for the reward I don't need one, for Monsieur Aubijoux has found a situation for me."

"I am very glad to hear it, but——"

"He has given me a place that suits me exactly, for I always liked travelling. He is going to take me with him to Mexico."

"What! is he going to leave France?"

"For some years, at all events. He is going to open a large commercial house over there, together with one of his friends, whose secretary I am to be."

"I congratulate you, and if I can be useful to you, before or after you start, let me know of it. Meantime, do me a service."

"Very willingly, colonel."

"As you are so well acquainted with Monsieur Aubijoux, you perhaps know a gentleman who often visits him, Monsieur d'Estelan?"

"Oh, yes! I know him very well. 'It is he who is to be my employer."

"How is that?"

"He has taken me for his secretary."

"What! is he going with Monsieur Aubijoux to Mexico?"

"He is going to stay there. They are partners."

"And do you leave soon?"

"In three days, colonel."

"Very well," said Souscarrière, who was beyond measure delighted. "I hope that the affairs of these gentlemen will prosper in America, and I congratulate them on the resolution they have taken. I shall soon call at the Boulevard Montmorency, but can you tell me where Monsieur d'Estelan lives?"

"At the same place as formerly, colonel, at No. 99 Rue de Rome."

"In the rooms where——"

"He lived before he was married. It seems that his marriage was very unfortunate."

"Is he in Paris now?"

"He has been here all the time, indeed ever since he came out of prison, thanks to you, colonel."

"Thank you for the information, my good fellow. You know my address. Come and see me before you go away, and don't refuse me the pleasure of making you a present. I am under very great obligations to you. But I must leave you now. I have an appointment. Remember me to Monsieur Aubijoux," added Souscarrière, to close the conversation. And he started off, making a joyful flourish with his cane, and mentally blessing the native of Marseilles who had relieved him from so much anxiety.

"How glad Guy will be to hear what I have to tell him! If Monsieur Guénégaud did not tarry at taverns, I should still be worrying myself about our dear Madeleine."

The colonel speedily reached the house where Guy de Baufré lived. He went in without speaking to the doorkeeper, and hastened up to the second floor, where he announced himself by a loud ring at the bell.

A woman opened the door. She was stout and disagreeable-looking, and exclaimed in a grumbling tone: "You ought not to ring so loudly. You know very well that some one is ill here."

"Some one is ill!" exclaimed Souscarrière; "is my nephew ill?"

"Is that young man your nephew, sir? I thought it so strange, and I said to myself that he must have some relations, somewhere, although he has nobody but a friend with him. It is true that he is well taken care of, all the same, as his friend had the good sense to send for me."

"Very well, very well, my good soul; stand aside and let me pass! I wish to see him."

"But you cannot see him, sir; the doctor says that I must not let anybody in."

"I don't care what the doctor says," said Souscarrière, thrusting the nurse on one side.

"Here comes the doctor, now," she said, with a sulky look. "Talk to him. It doesn't concern me. I am going back to the young gentleman."

The colonel said no more to the woman, but let her go, and waited for the physician who was coming up the stairs. He was a fashionable doctor, the same whom Guy had met at Antonia's house.

"I am Monsieur de Bautru's uncle," said Souscarrière, who was greatly disturbed. "I have just come from the country, and I hear that he is ill. It is not serious, I trust——"

"It is very serious," replied the doctor. "Monsieur de Bautru has the small-pox."

"But is that dangerous?"

"He will recover, I hope. He has improved very much to-day. But yesterday I felt extremely anxious. The illness began very badly, and had I not taken it in time——"

"Come in with me, sir; I am going to see him."

"Don't go into his room. He is sleeping, and needs rest very much. Besides, he must not be excited, and as he does not expect you——"

"How is it that I was not informed of his illness?" interrupted the colonel.

"He would not give your address."

"But did he want to die—the cruel boy?"

"He was taken suddenly. It was his own fault. He went, in spite of my warning, to see Antonia, the Grasshopper, who had the small-pox very badly. She won't recover, poor girl, and without intending it she has given the disease to two of her friends who had the imprudence to call upon her—Bautru and a Monsieur Frédoc, whom you perhaps know. Ah! it is a clear case of contagion ——"

"Frédoc!" exclaimed Souscarrière.

"Good heavens, yes! He is dying, I hear. But I am not attending him myself. Ah! your nephew is lucky. He has been taken excellent care of—first, by me, and secondly, by his friend, who has never left him. And the strangest thing of all is that his friend came to him when everybody else had deserted him. The man-servant ran off, under pretence of not having been vaccinated. Poor Bautru was delirious, and his doorkeeper would have left him here to die. However, this providential friend saved him. He came to see your nephew without knowing that he was ill, and as soon as he learned that he was confined to his bed he made that rascal of a doorkeeper let him into the room, and since then he has stayed here. Ah! he can truly say that he has saved Monsieur de Bautru's life."

"What is his name?"

"He must be your friend, also. His name is Monsieur d'Estelan."

"Estelan!" exclaimed Souscarrière, who was greatly excited. "Did you say Estelan?"

"Yes," said the doctor; "don't you know him?"

"It is impossible! You must be mistaken."

"I don't think so, unless he gave me another name than his own. He sent for me to come here on the very first day, and he sent his card on

which I read the name 'Louis d'Estelan.' I remember the address, also. It was No. 99 Rue de Rome."

"And you say that he has seen my nephew?"

"Seen—oh, yes, and tended and taken care of him as a father would take care of a child. I won't say that he has spoken to him, for when he came Monsieur de Bautru was delirious, and he did not know any one. Besides, he fell into a comatose state afterwards, and could not talk at all. But Monsieur d'Estelan would not give him up. He sent for a nurse, for form's sake, for he could easily have done without one. In fact, I never met with a hospital nurse to equal him. Ah! sir, such friends are rare."

"Friends!" repeated Souscarrière, in utter amazement.

"Nine times out of ten the patient is left alone when there is any danger, and then there is no one by but 'friends,' that is to say, companions. But one's family, sir, there's nothing like one's own family! However, I will not utter a tirade against egotism. We live in a world where it is general. 'Every one for himself' is the fashionable motto."

"Excuse me, sir," said Souscarrière, who thought the philosophical reflections of the doctor rather annoying. "Can you tell me whether Monsieur d'Estelan will be here to-day?"

"Be here? he is here! He comes very early every morning, and goes away very late. At first he stayed all night."

"But is he here now?"

"Yes. He is here."

Souscarrière stepped towards the door of the sitting room, which communicated with his nephew's bedchamber, but he did not go far. He was greatly overcome, although he was a man who did not usually hesitate at trying moments. His first impulse had been to rush to his nephew's side, but he had paused, at the physician's request. Again now he stopped, when about to go and speak to the generous Estelan, who had risked his life for his rival's sake. The old soldier was at a loss what to think. The enemy was the enemy no longer. What should he say to him? How could he thank him? How express his gratitude at Guy de Bautru's bedside?

The doctor came to his aid. He was not wanting in tact, and his speciality as a physician of the gay world now came well into play. He guessed that there was something peculiar in the situations of affairs.

"Monsieur d'Estelan is at his post," he said, "but your nephew does not need him now and is sleeping. Besides, the nurse is there. You would like to speak to Monsieur d'Estelan, would you not?"

"I must see him," said Souscarrière.

"Shall I call him?"

✓ "You would greatly oblige me by doing so. I will wait for him in the dining-room."

The physician thereupon left the room, and presently reappeared and told Souscarrière in a low voice that his nephew was still sleeping, and that Estelan was coming to him. He added that Bautru was out of danger, that he would answer for his recovery, and that his convalescence would not be a long one. Souscarrière thanked him warmly as he took leave, and the amiable physician was still on the landing when Madeleine's husband made his appearance.

He was very pale, but extremely calm, and did not seem to be surprised. It was evident that the physician had told him that it was Guy's uncle who awaited him.

Souscarrière was much more embarrassed than Estelan, for he stammered out a few commonplace sentences, in which he spoke of the service rendered, of gratitude, and so on, but not a word of the strangeness of the situation.

"You owe me nothing, sir," rejoined Estelan coldly. "I have done what Monsieur de Bautre would have done for me under similar circumstances. And I beg you to believe that I did not think of doing all this, for we were not friends—far from it. Nothing obliged me to come here. I came simply to tell him of a resolution which I had taken."

"I know what it was," interrupted Souscarrière, who had obtained ample information on the point from Marius Guénégaud, "it honours you as much as your devotion, and ——"

"I do not ask you to judge of it. I should have abstained from seeing you had I not been obliged to tell you what I could not say to Monsieur de Bautre. When I came here he was unable to understand or even hear me."

"Any one else would have gone away, but you remained."

"I remained, because I saw that Monsieur de Bautre was deserted by his servants, and reduced to such isolation as would have resulted in his death, for want of care. The question was one of mere humanity. I might have left it to you, but you had gone away from Paris, and I did not know what had become of you. The doctor questioned your nephew, but Monsieur de Bautre either could not or would not tell him. I thought, however, that your absence could not continue for long, and I resolved to await your return here. I thought, in fact, that you would come here as soon as you arrived, and I wished to speak with you. It is for that reason alone that you now find me here."

"You are trying to lessen the merit of your conduct. You cannot prevent my thinking and saying that it is heroic."

"Think whatever you please, sir. I do not ask for your praises; but I do not wish that you should imagine that I have been taking care of Monsieur de Bautre merely to create an effect. I did not let Monsieur de Mangars know of his illness, because I felt sure that he would come here, if I did inform him, and I should have found it painful to meet him and another person——"

"You are mistaken if you think that the lady you allude to would have come here. She would not have done so any more than my nephew would have gone to her, which he has not done since he discovered that she was not a widow. They both agreed to separate, and they have done so. If Monsieur de Bautre had wished to profit by his illness, he had only to let Monsieur de Mangars know of it; but he would not have tried to turn it to account for such a purpose."

"I know that, sir, and I believe you. But I preferred to see you, and you alone. I first thought of seeing Monsieur de Bautre; and the choice which I then made proves that I esteem him and believe him to be trustworthy. It seemed to me natural to tell him of my intentions, and ask him to inform all those who were interested respecting them. I now hope that you will listen to me in his place, and accept a mission which he would faithfully have fulfilled, no doubt."

"I will fulfill it in his place, but regretfully, I swear to you. I know what your purpose is, and it is not my place to approve of it, but I declare that you have a noble heart."

"Then," said Estelan, without showing that this sincere praise touched

his feelings, "you know that I propose returning to Mexico, and that I intend to remain there?"

"With Monsieur Aubijoux. I have just met Marius Guénégaud, who told me so."

"I delayed my departure in order to wait for you here, but I can assure you now that in three days' time I shall have left Paris. Tell her who bears my name that she has nothing more to fear from me. I should have been glad to restore her freedom to her, and deliver her from a yoke that weighs heavily upon her, but she knows that the law is against that, and she will not charge me with a misfortune which I share with her. We shall live apart from one another and have no communication whatever. The death of one or the other of us will end this sad compromise. I hope that it may be my death, and that it will not be long in coming. Farewell, sir! We shall not meet again."

Having thus spoken, Louis d'Estelan went towards the door, but Souscarrière stopped him by a gesture.

"Then you no longer love her?" he asked, in a choking voice.

"Why do you care to know?" rejoined Madeleine's husband, coldly.

"I understand," exclaimed the colonel, "yes, I understand all the sublimity of the sacrifice which you have laid upon yourself, and I admire you as much as I pity you. You would have been happy; we should have been friends. Accursed be the man who separated you from Madeleine by his guilty manoeuvres, and who has separated you from me!"

"He is dying," said Estelan, in a low voice, "and I forgive him."

"You are more generous than I am. But Heaven has punished him, and I will forget his crimes. What I shall never forget, sir, is what you are doing in condemning yourself to exile. I hope that you will not think of me as an enemy, and that you will allow me to shake hands with you."

Estelan started, but did not refuse, and the clasped hands were pressed cordially together.

Souscarrière would have gladly embraced the young fellow, and it cost him a great effort to let him go without telling him all that he felt towards him, without protesting once more how deeply he sympathised with him, and without thanking him for all he had done for Guy. "That devil of a Frédoc," he muttered, and he rushed into the room where his nephew was sleeping.

Poor Guy seemed quiet, and the nurse made a sign to Souscarrière not to awaken him. The colonel, who had come in like a whirlwind, now drew near on tiptoe, and approached the bedside. Tears filled his eyes as they fell on Bautru's face, which was covered with a greyish crust, forming, as it were, a mask, and preventing him from opening his eyes. The old soldier had great difficulty in keeping himself from speaking to his nephew and warmly embracing him, but the stout woman judiciously interposed her person between him and the bed, and even took the liberty of taking hold of his sleeve to lead him from the room.

Souscarrière made no resistance. He remembered what the doctor had said, and understood that it was no time to disturb the patient with caresses, still less with questions.

"Ah, tell me," said he, when the nurse had closed the door again, "you can answer for his recovery now, can you not?"

"I can, by my word, sir," she replied, with a solemn air. "On condition, however, that you do not send me away, for if I were not here——"

"You shall remain till he is up again, and even longer, if you wish, and I will pay you double wages."

"You are very kind, sir. Then the other gentleman will not return?"

"What other gentleman?"

"The young man, his friend, who was taking care of him."

"No. I am here now, and we do not need him."

"So much the better, for I have an idea that he did not like him. When he came Monsieur de Bautru was beginning to be delirious, and yet he looked at him so strangely and seemed to frown at him."

"He will not frown at him any more," replied Souscarrière, who had no more time to lose in talking. "Now, listen to me. I am going out, but shall presently return. If my nephew wakes up, tell him that I have returned to Paris. That will prepare him for seeing me."

"You may be quite sure that I'll do so, sir, and that all will be well. I can even promise you that the young gentleman won't be marked. It would be a great pity, such a handsome young man; but I have a way of preventing that by piercing each pustule with a needle, and then——"

"Never mind! oblige me by returning to his bedside. I shall be back in an hour, and I will take your place."

Once in the street Souscarrière hurried towards the Place de la Trinité faster than a cab horse could have gone. "What news! what news!" he said to himself, as he ran into the courtyard of the count's house. "Maugars will be enchanted; Madeleine will be satisfied. She must be; and yet Monsieur d'Estelan is well worth regretting. She would have had a husband in him such as falls to the lot of few women, and if ever she becomes a widow she will never find another such man. Well! it is written! What a devil that Frédoc was! I can only say that again."

Souscarrière found his friend smoking a cigar at the sitting-room window, the same window, through which Louis Vallouris had passed at a single leap.

"Victory!" exclaimed the old soldier, "Estelan has given up the game: he is going to Mexico, and will never return. We are rid of him. Madeleine is free. It is true that she is not a widow, but still——"

"Explain yourself clearly," said the count, who was very much startled. "In the first place, where have you come from?"

"From La Bretèche, of course!"

"When did you get here?"

"This morning at 4.30."

"And you only come here now."

"My dear friend, I was very anxious to see you, but I was still more anxious to see my nephew and I began with him. I am glad that I did for——"

But Souscarrière did not finish what he was about to say. Madeleine had opened the door, and on seeing Bautru's uncle talking with her father, she went towards him, hurriedly.

"You have come just in time," said the colonel, kissing her on both cheeks, "I have news, great news, which I was just about to tell your father, and which particularly concerns you."

"Some fresh misfortune, perhaps," said the young girl, in a low tone.

"Not at all! My news is excellent, that is to say, not all of it, for Guy is ill."

"And we did not know of it?"

"It is his fault. He was taken ill the day after I left, and he did not

write, probably so as not to alarm me. I shall tell him what I think of his behaviour when he gets well. He preferred to die like a dog, as he might have done, rather than break the promise he had given not to communicate with you."

"What! Is he still ill?"

"He is not able to converse. The physician calls it a 'comatose condition,' and he sleeps day and night. I did not wish to awaken him."

"But what ails him?" asked M. de Maugars.

"The small-pox. He has been very near dying, and would not have lived had he not been well taken care of."

"By whom? His servants? He might have had us with him."

"As for servants, I found a nurse at the Rue Auber. His man-servant had run off, frightened on the very first day, and he is still running perhaps. The doorkeeper, moreover, almost had Guy taken to a hospital, under the pretext that the other tenants were afraid of contagious diseases."

"And he had no friend by him to take his part and watch over him?"

"My dear nephew's friends are gentlemen who only call on people when they are well."

"But he was not alone?"

"No. One person did not leave him from the first day—a person who had never set foot in his rooms before, and whom I did not expect to meet there."

"Who was that?" asked Madeleine.

"Guess. But no; I will tell you, for you would never guess. It was Monsieur d'Estelan, your husband."

"What!"

"Yes, my friends, it was he."

"What was he doing in your nephew's rooms?" asked M. de Maugars.

"Prepare yourself to be astonished, for what I have to tell you is very startling indeed. Monsieur d'Estelan, as I was saying when Madeleine came in, has resolved to leave France for ever. He voluntarily abandons all thought of using his legal right over his wife, and he regrets that he cannot give her back her liberty by having the marriage annulled. This is all the more generous on his part as his feelings towards her have not changed. He still loves her, and will never be consoled for her loss. In a word, he is sacrificing himself, and trusts his honour to her until he meets with his death in Mexico. It is an act of pure chivalry, you know, and I confess that I now sincerely admire the brave young fellow, although I did not at all fancy him when I left Anjou. What do you say to it all, Maugars?"

"I say that all this does not explain how Estelan came to be in your nephew's rooms."

"I will tell you. It is still more noble and extraordinary. Estelan wished to inform Guy of his decision, which he had long thought over, and which is so much to his honour. For reasons which you will understand, he did not desire to see you or your daughter, and he did not care to write to you. He considered that his rival was a gentleman in every respect, and he was right in that."

"What! did he wish to ask your nephew to tell us of his going away!"

"Yes. It was certainly a strange idea, but not without nobility. He thought that Guy would tell you of his resolution, and so he went to the Rue Auber at the moment when poor Guy had taken to his bed. Every-

thing was in confusion, but the doorkeeper thought that Monsieur d'Estelan was a friend of his tenant's, and so he let him in at once. It was then that the worthy young fellow who has suffered so much injustice showed what kind of man he is. Will you believe that he remained with my nephew, watching over him, and taking care of him with devoted kindness which never wearied for a moment? He sent for a physician, who told me that if it had not been for Estelan Guy could never have recovered. Do not weep, Madeleine! He is well now, thanks to Monsieur d'Estelan."

Madeleine wiped away her tears without replying. She was in a state of indescribable agitation.

"It is a noble act," remarked M. de Maugars, readily enough, but without any display of enthusiasm. "It is too noble, in fact, for it is not natural. But I presume that Monsieur d'Estelan is not with your nephew now."

"He left him, after explaining his intentions to me, and begging me to communicate them to you. I have lost no time in so doing, as you see. Estelan has now returned to his rooms in the Rue de Rome."

"What, does he still live there?" exclaimed the count.

"Yes. I was looking for him everywhere, and he was near here all the time. But he won't be here for long; he is going away."

"When?" asked Madeleine, eagerly.

"In three days' time, he says; and it must be true, for I met a man whom he is going to take with him to Mexico, and who told me the same thing. Besides, Monsieur d'Estelan is incapable of uttering a falsehood. I am going to call on him to-morrow to tell him once more how much I admire his conduct, and thank him better than I was able to do in the short interview which we had together. You approve of that, Madeleine, do you not?"

"With all my heart," she replied, in a stifled voice.

"I was sure of it, and I am certain that you will allow me to tell him that you are touched by his generosity and self-abnegation. You do not and cannot love him; but all the same it is true that he is worthy of you, and but for the fatality which— But you are leaving the room. Where are you going?"

"Allow me to retire. I feel very much disturbed."

"Go, my child," said M. de Maugars. "I wish to speak of serious matters with Souscarrière."

Madeleine was pale, but her eyes shone with unusual lustre. She bent forward to receive a kiss from M. de Maugars upon her forehead, and then slowly left the room.

"Poor girl!" said Souscarrière, "Estelan's generosity will not restore her lost happiness."

"You have said enough about this man's generosity," replied the count, sullenly.

"It deserves all praise. Do you dispute it?"

"I think that it is a matter of calculation."

"How do you make that out?"

"Don't you see that by taking care of your nephew he knew that he should not be losing his time? It is not yet proved that he intends to go away. I am sure that he won't go until he is utterly obliged to give up the game, after doing all he can to reconquer Madeleine."

"He had a very simple and efficacious means at his disposal to reconquer her as you call it, but he has had the delicacy not to avail himself of

it. But why should you exile yourself to Louisiana? Why take Madeleine to America when her husband himself is going across the ocean. Guy will start for Africa as soon as he is well again. Nothing obliges you to leave Paris now."

"You forget Monsieur Frédoc," said the count, bitterly.

"Frédoc is dying."

"What is this you tell me? Dying!"

"Yes, my friend, of small-pox. The physician who attends Guy told me this piece of news, which does not greatly afflict me. The strangest part of it all is that Frédoc, as well as Guy, caught the malady by calling upon an actress named Antonia—the woman that your notary protected. She herself had caught the disease, Heaven knows how, and she is dying also, as I have been told."

There was a pause, and M. de Maugars seemed lost in thought. "I have a piece of news to tell you on my own account," he suddenly exclaimed. "Aurore is dead."

"Madeleine's nurse! Did she catch Frédoc's complaint?"

"No. She died very suddenly, and in frightful agony. She sent for me, and I went to see her; but it was too late."

"This is strange!" exclaimed Souscarrière. "It seems as though Heaven has punished all those who have injured you. It is true that my nephew has been ill as well, but he will recover. You can easily understand that I must now go and remain at his bedside, and you will excuse me if I don't breakfast with you. I must return to the Rue Auber at once."

The count did not attempt to detain his friend, and Souscarrière, after pressing his hand even more warmly than usual, went off as he had come, at a rapid pace. He had reached the foot of the stairs, and was just turning along the vestibule when he saw a woman leaving the house in advance of him. At one glance he recognised Madeleine. Although his footsteps were audible enough she did not turn, and she evidently did not know that he was behind her.

"The devil fly away with me if I imagined she would go out for a walk to-day," muttered Souscarrière to himself, "and the strangest thing of all is that she has taken off her black dress."

"Where can she be going," he resumed, on seeing Madeleine turn to the left, after passing out of the court-yard. "What can possess her to go out at this time of day instead of remaining with poor Maugars, who is so upset?"

Madeleine was walking fast and was some distance in advance of Souscarrière when he reached the sidewalk of the Place de la Trinité. He saw that she was following the Rue Saint-Lazare, keeping close to the houses.

"It is probably the first time in her life that she has walked out alone," muttered Bautru's uncle, "and I believe that I should do well to follow her, for something she is far from expecting might occur. She is as pretty as a picture, and quite unacquainted with the streets."

He followed in the direction she had taken, managing to keep near her without exposing himself to the risk of being seen in case she turned round. But she did not think of doing so. She went on like a person who has a certain aim in view; she did not look at the passers-by, and still less did she think of who might be behind her.

"She is in a hurry," reflected the colonel, still trudging along; "in a great hurry, upon my word! She cannot have taken many minutes to

change her dress. When she left the drawing room just now she was in black from head to foot, and now she looks like a woman of fashion going to visit some stylish shop. It is really very strange! I cannot understand it, upon my honour! I really have half a mind to approach her? It is ridiculous to walk behind her in this style, like some old gallant following a milliner's girl who is out on an errand. If Madeleine saw me watching her like this she would feel angry, and rightly, too. I had better join her and ask her where she is going."

And thereupon the good old colonel began to lengthen his strides. But he soon slackened his pace again, for, by the time he had taken half-a-dozen steps, he had reflected anew. "After all, I have no right to meddle with her affairs," he said, "and she is not called upon to answer me. I am not her father; and she is not accountable to me."

Souscarrière stopped short, and he was about to retrace his steps when he saw the young girl turn to the right and enter the Rue Caumartin.

"What!" he exclaimed, "then I need not alter my course to go to Guy's. The Rue Caumartin ends at the Rue Auber. She is going towards the house where he lives. Then I may as well go that way as any other." And he started off again.

On turning the corner round which Madeleine had gone, he saw her still keeping to the right, and dashing his hand to his head, he muttered, "I understand it all now! she is going to see poor Guy! Why didn't I think of that before? She heard me say that he has been in danger, and she wishes to express her sympathy. That is quite natural. But she ought to have asked me to go with her. It would have been far more proper. However, when a woman is only twenty, and in love, she doesn't care for all that. Besides, the visit won't compromise her; the old nurse won't let her go near my nephew, and even if she did the poor fellow is not in any condition to say soft things to her."

Souscarrière still walked on while he talked to himself, and Madeleine, on her side, continued to advance, unaware that her old friend was watching her. She crossed the Rue Joubert, the Rue de Provence, and the Boulevard Haussmann without stopping, and when she reached Guy's house, the colonel saw her hand a letter to the doorkeeper.

He at once stepped forward and joined Madeleine just as, after a few words with the doorkeeper, she walked up the street again. As he had no further motive for avoiding her, he spared her half the way, for she had caught sight of him and was evidently coming towards him.

"Did you follow me?" she asked, with a blush.

"Yes, all the way from the Place de la Trinité. I took that very great liberty," replied Guy's uncle, laughing.

"Oh, I do not consider it such, and I have nothing to hide from you."

"Then you will allow me to go back with you; but this time you must take my arm."

Madeleine made a gesture of surprise and hesitation; but after a moment's pause, she replied: "I should be happy to have you with me as an escort, but——"

"But what? Do you consider me compromising as a cavalier?" said the colonel, laughing again.

"No, but I am not going back to the house."

"Where are you going?"

"You will see, my friend, if you do me the favour of accompanying me."

"A mystery! Very well. That does not alarm me. You cannot

have any but proper mysteries. But my curiosity is excited, and I warn you that I shan't leave you. I want to find out the secret, if there is one."

"You will find it out presently."

"Then we are near the place?"

"We shall be there in a quarter of an hour."

"I never saw you look so pretty, and you wear such a charming dress, that I am not a fitting companion for you with my old clothes, such as I wear at La Bretèche."

"Oh! this dress is the one I wore on my wedding-day—a travelling dress, you see."

"Not the dress you wore at the church?"

"No. I put it on after I returned home, and I have never worn it since."

"True! The next day you put on mourning, and you have just laid it aside. That is a painful remembrance. Let us talk of something else. Did I tell you that Maugars persists in his plan of going to Louisiana? It is absurd, as no one threatens his peace any more. I hope that you will persuade him to remain in France."

"I shall do all that I can; but whatever he may decide to do I shall not return to the country where I passed my childhood."

"That is right! You are on my side, and we shall get the upper hand of Maugars, who will not be able to leave you. I shall take you both away with me to La Bretèche. Ah! here we are at the Rue du Rocher! We must be near your mystery."

"Yes," muttered Madeleine, who now seemed more thoughtful than when Souscarrière had accosted her.

Relapsing into silence, she turned so as to bring the colonel to a hilly street near the Western Railway Station. Souscarrière did not think of looking at the name of this thoroughfare. He was watching Madeleine's sweet face, which he noticed had grown gloomy. •It seemed as though she were marching to her fate, and did not know what might await her.

"My dear child," said the colonel, who felt her arm tremble beside his, "you seem to be fatigued and ill. I do not know where you are going, but if you keep on in this direction we shall end at the fortifications, and you are certainly not able to go so far. Can't you put off your walk to another day?"

"No," replied Madeleine, with an effort. "I have delayed it only too long already."

"It must be something very serious, then. What can you have to do in this out-of-the-way street?"

"My duty. We have reached the spot."

"Really—where are we?" said the colonel, looking about him. "Why, this is the Rue de Rome." •

"I am going here."

"What! to No. 99? Are you going to see Estelan?"

"I am going to my own home. I am married, and my husband's house is mine," replied Madeleine, firmly.

"What are you thinking of?" exclaimed Souscarrière. "Your husband gives you back your freedom, and you voluntarily reassume a chain which he has broken in twain! This is madness!"

"No," replied Madeleine. "I have already told you that it is my duty."

"Your duty? I could understand your saying so if Estelan required you to submit. But he has given you up."

"I know that."

"Well, then, why do you do this?"

"I have not renounced him."

"And you wish to force him to receive you? Come! come! my dear child, you have not reflected upon the consequences of this step, and it is very fortunate that I met you in time to stop you."

"My resolution is taken. I had, in fact, already made up my mind when I saw you this morning. I should have acted long before now, indeed, if I had known where to find my husband. You told me this morning where he was, and I have come to him at once."

"He will not receive you. He—I am rude, perhaps—but I will ~~say~~ that he does not need you."

"You told me that he still loved me."

"Yes, but he hopes to cure himself of his love; and it is in order to forget you that he is going to Mexico with his friend Aubijoux."

Souscarrière did not understand the upright nature of the young girl to whom he spoke.

A woman of her age reasons but little, and is often mistaken; but she makes her mistakes in good faith. She is ignorant of prudential motives, and is not satisfied with any compromise or half-way measures. The impressions of her heart have a direct influence upon her acts. She acts, indeed, as she feels.

Madeleine, whom first love had led to Guy de Bautru, had then become attached to Louis d'Estelan, because she imagined that Guy had ceased to care for her. She had misunderstood the young man's feelings. Later on, believing herself to be a widow, she had returned to Guy as sincerely as before; but after the events which had recently taken place, and since she had learnt all that her husband had suffered so unjustly, she had reproached herself with having forgotten Estelan too soon, and had not approved of the stand taken against him after his re-appearance. She thought that Maugars and his friend Souscarrière might have given a better reception to a man whom they had so ill-treated, and if she had been the mistress of her own actions, Estelan would not have had to ask her to return to him. She would have gone back of her own accord without the least pressure.

Everything bade her do so. Both duty, of which she had a deep sense, and horror of a false position—and none could be more false than that in which she had been placed by the Count de Maugars' project of removing her from France. To live separated from her husband, as well as from Bautru, to be reduced to waiting for the death of the unfortunate Estelan, who adored her—such a future was certainly a dismal one.

But Madeleine had not been free. She had still believed herself to be Maugars' daughter, and gratitude as well as filial love had bound her to him. It would have been a terrible sacrifice to relinquish the man whom she looked upon as a father. Thus she had refused to choose between him and her husband. She had fallen into a passive condition, leaving all things to Heaven, which guides human beings to duty and comforts the sorrowful.

Her interview with Louis d'Estelan had not changed her determination to resign herself, although her husband had been very harsh with her. In her own heart she thought that he had a right to exact her presence in his home, and she forgave him for demanding his rights so energetically, for she realised that his despotic manner was born of passionate love.

Louis d'Estelan had not, however, put his threats into execution. He

was hiding himself, and the less he showed himself the more she thought of him, the more she pitied him. She had ended by not fearing him at all, and almost desired his coming. And it was at this critical moment that Madeleine, sad and full of regret, learned that her husband was about to go away for good. She had certainly not hesitated between M. de Maugars and Frédoc, but the sacred tie which had bound her to Maugars was now broken. The count was not her father, but Estelan was still her husband.

How could she abstain from going to the man who had been blameless throughout, whilst the honour of others had been torn to shreds? He had not calumniated his enemies; he had not deceived any one. He had done naught but good.

But he had disappeared; and Madeleine, deserted by him, could only hope in silence that perhaps at the last moment he would hold out his arms to her, as a wounded man upon the field of battle appeals for help.

Suddenly, however, Souscarrière had announced that Estelan had revealed his whereabouts—that he was about to sacrifice himself for his wife, after risking his life for his rival's sake. The generosity, devotion, and self-abnegation he displayed sufficed to bring her back to him.

Guy de Bautru was out of danger. Madeleine, who no longer feared his death, had sufficient courage to write to him that all was at an end between them for ever, that the past could return no more, and that for the future she belonged to her husband. Her letter was a very touching one. She had carried it to Guy's house in person, and from that instant she again became the loving wife of Louis d'Estelan, so far as her own feelings were concerned.

Souscarrière, who was still opposed to the plan she had formed, furnished her with an opportunity for declaring that her resolution could not be overcome.

"If he remains in Paris, I shall remain with him," said Madeleine.

"Not against his will, I presume?" asked Souscarrière.

"He will not repulse me, for he loves me," replied Madeleine.

"Do you love him?"

"Yes. And I even think that I have never loved any one but him."

"You ought to have found it out before; poor Guy would then not be feeling as he does."

"I beg him to forgive me, and I am sure that he has too lofty a mind not to approve of my conduct."

"You have an answer for everything," replied the old soldier, testily.

"But after this, I hope my nephew will never listen to any woman. I trust he'll remain a mere corporal as long as he lives. Well, you have made up your mind to go in, I see," Souscarrière added, pointing to Estelan's house, the door of which they had just reached.

"Yes," replied Madeleine, decisively.

"Go, then, as I can't prevent you from doing so. But as your husband may refuse to receive you, you must allow me to wait here for a few moments."

Madeleine did not reply, but she looked at Souscarrière. This look said everything: all that she wished for, all that she regretted, and all that she suffered in crossing the wishes of her old friend and of others still dearer to her. However, she left him, and without turning her head she crossed the threshold, which she had already traversed on the day before her marriage, on the Count de Maugars' arm. That day, she had gaily gone to see the rooms where her affianced lover lived. She had

never entered the house since then, and now she went there almost as a suppliant.

Souscarrière remained outside, stamping his feet and swearing loudly at Estelan and his devotion, at young girls whose hearts were like "weather-cocks," and at Frédoc, Mangars, and even poor Bautru, who was certainly not to blame for what had happened.

The colonel, however, was angry with everybody, and he ought to have been so with himself, for his ungovernable temper had certainly increased the misfortunes of his friends.

"The devil take them all!" he muttered, striding up and down the pavement. "I ought never to have left La Bretèche. I should then have avoided this Parisian wasp's nest. I shall go and shut myself up in Anjou, after I have taken my poor nephew to Algiers, and unless La Bretèche is burnt down I will never leave it again. Mangars can come there to end his days if he likes, but I shan't take any interest in anything now excepting my woods, my horses, and my dogs. Mangars is paying very dear for his youthful follies. We shall see what he will say to Madeleine's change of feeling. I am afraid that it will be a death-blow to him. However, he has the satisfaction of being rid of Frédoc's persecutions."

Souscarrière had only just uttered the pseudo-bachelor's name when he saw a stout woman, whose figure and face he recognised, coming towards him. It was the female whom he had one day followed so persistently, Brigitte, Frédoc's housekeeper, and her appearance, just as he was thinking of her master, reminded him of a well-known proverb. Surprised at the sight of her, he was still more startled when she accosted him. The expression of her face shewed that she was labouring under great excitement, and, indeed, she said to him without any preamble: "He is dying."

"Who? Monsieur Frédoc?"

"Yes. He wishes to see you."

"What for?"

"To ask your pardon before he dies."

"I don't need to see him. He could not have told you to come to look for me in the Rue de Rome. He knows that I don't live here."

"No. He sent me to Monsieur d'Estelan, to Monsieur de Mangars, and Monsieur de Bautru; he wishes to see them all, and more than everything he wishes to see his daughter. As I have met you here I beg you to add your entreaties to mine. He is afraid that she may refuse to come to him, or be prevented from doing so."

"I don't know what she may decide in the matter, but you did quite right by coming to Monsieur d'Estelan first."

"The Rue de la Bienfaisance is so near that I came here first. I shall next go to the Place de la Trinité, and then——"

"To find me? Well, here I am! My nephew is ill, and besides, he has no grudge against your master now. However, I doubt whether Monsieur de Mangars will consent to see Monsieur Frédoc."

"It does not matter if——"

"If Madeleine will go; it is she whom Monsieur Frédoc most desires to see, is it not? Well, she is here in this house. With her husband, you understand," added Souscarrière. "Go up and speak to her yourself."

"Without you?"

"Yes. I have no power to advise her under such circumstances. She will consult her heart alone, and she will do quite right."

"I will go to her, then," replied Brigitte, quietly.

"Very well. I will wait here."

The conversation had lasted but a few moments, and it was curtailed by the housekeeper's entering the house. Souscarrière began to walk up and down again, more disturbed and affected than previously. Nature had made him violent, but not pitiless, and hearing that Frédoc was dying, he felt very sad.

"The sorry ending of an ugly tale," he muttered. "He will perhaps die without seeing his daughter again, and maybe he does not deserve to see her after all he has done. This is the consequence of going out of the path of rectitude to seek revenge. The sword or pistols, those are the only weapons. Whoever strikes in the dark is a rascal. Frédoc deserves his fate. Yet he had feeling. When he spoke of having been robbed of his daughter by Maugars, his voice almost made me shed tears. If Madeleine asked my advice in the matter I should tell her to go and see the dying man, for he is her father after all. But she won't ask me, never fear. She will consult her lord and master, Estelan. He must be at home, and has made her welcome, since she does not return. The housekeeper will interfere with their reconciliation, perhaps. Who knows how it may all end? I can't wait here all day for Madeleine, and it seems to me that I am playing a very stupid part. I have a great mind to go off and let them settle matters to suit themselves."

However, the colonel still tarried. He did not like to depart without being sure that Madeleine had become reconciled to her husband. In point of fact, he expected that such would be the case, for he knew very well that Louis d'Estelan had never ceased to love his wife. But he wished to tell his friend Maugars what had occurred. The great news would necessarily change all his plans. So the colonel continued walking up and down the pavement, muttering, gesticulating, and looking up at the windows.

He did not know on which floor Estelan lived, but he hoped that it would occur to Madeleine to look out of the window to see whether her old friend were still waiting for her. However, no one appeared.

"The housekeeper does not return," he muttered. "They have received her, that's clear—and that proves that they have made it up. I can't blame them for doing so. It was the best thing they could do, I am obliged to confess it. But, goodness gracious! here they come!"

As he spoke, he caught sight of Madeleine at the entrance, leaning upon her husband's arm.

"Well," muttered he, "I know what to think now, and I may as well lay down my arms and fly."

He was about to take himself off—the last resource of the vanquished, and, when the defeat is honourable, their final consolation. But the married couple, followed by Brigitte, were coming towards him, and he did not wish to look as if he were flying from them. So he waited, standing still; and when Louis d'Estelan held out his hand to him, he shook it.

"He is dying," said Madeleine, without mentioning Frédoc by name. "Let us go to him."

Souscarrière hesitated for a moment. He felt grateful to the young girl for sparing him any comment upon the presence of her husband, but he did not care to hear the farewell of his dying enemy.

"I beg of you," said Madeleine, with an imploring look in her eyes.

"If you wish it I will go with you," he answered, "but I solemnly swear that I would refuse to do it for any one else than you."

Madeleine cut his explanations short by turning towards the Rue de la Bienfaisance, which was not far distant. Brigitte went ahead, and very swiftly for so corpulent a person, while Souscarrière walked behind the young couple. He thought that he was in a ridiculous position, but he would not break his word to Madeleine, and persevered in his course.

The walk was swift and silent. They reached Frédoc's house without exchanging a single word, and on the stairs they met the notary who now had charge of Prunevaux's practice.

He was going off with a portfolio under his arm, and he stopped Souscarrière on the way. The colonel waited and spoke with him, while M. and Madame d'Estelan, led by Brigitte, entered the dying man's rooms.

"If he really wishes to see me he will, no doubt, ask for me," said Souscarrière to the young lawyer.

"I do not think that he is able to express a wish," replied the notary. "The physician, who is with him, told me that he was swiftly passing away. The effort he made in dictating and signing his last wishes has exhausted him."

"He thought of making his will, then?" said Souscarrière.

"Yes, at the last moment. I was sent for in great haste, and I had only just time to do what was necessary. I am very glad this will has been made, for it will repair a very serious and undeserved misfortune."

"What do you mean?"

"Monsieur Yvrande, called Frédoc, has left his entire fortune to Madame d'Estelan, whose father, the Count de Maugars, lost his money by the dishonesty of my predecessor, Prunevaux. Monsieur Yvrande has made her heiress to everything on condition that she pays a yearly pension to his housekeeper."

"Indeed!" said Souscarrière, who was greatly affected by this intelligence, but wished to look as though he heard it with the utmost indifference.

"I thought it somewhat strange, but I understand it now," added the lawyer. "Monsieur Frédoc carried conscientiousness to excess. He was, it appears, one of Prunevaux's boon companions, and at the last moment he reproached himself for having, in a measure, contributed to Monsieur de Maugars' ruin by leading my predecessor into gay society. Accordingly, as he had no direct heirs, he has left everything to the count's daughter."

"He wrote her name, then, in the will?"

"Yes, Madame Madeleine d'Estelan, *née* De Maugars, of course. How did you imagine he had called her?"

"I did not think anything about it. I meant nothing by my remark. But it remains to be seen whether Madame d'Estelan will accept the money."

"Why shouldn't she accept it?"

"Why, indeed? Really, my dear sir, my remarks are perfectly foolish. I knew Monsieur Frédoc very well, and the sudden news that he was dying has somewhat upset me."

"That is quite natural. He thought of you; for he sent for you at the same time as his heiress."

"I hope that he did not leave me anything!" exclaimed the colonel.

"Don't be alarmed, sir," said the notary, smiling. "Allow me to bid you good day."

Souscarrière was glad to see him go off, and made no effort to detain him.

"There was something good about this Frédoc, after all," thought the old colonel. "He has left everything to Madeleine without publicly revealing that she was his daughter. That is noble, almost as noble as the conduct of Estelan—but Estelan is rewarded for his generosity, while this poor man is dying."

At this moment Madeleine reappeared, with her face bathed in tears. "He died blessing me," said she, in a stifled voice—"blessing me, and asking the forgiveness of all whom he had injured."

"I forgave him long ago," muttered Souscarrière, and he relapsed into deep thought.

* * * * *

Three months have gone by. Madeleine, who wears mourning for her father, is travelling in Switzerland with her husband, and they will winter in Italy. They are ending as they ought to have begun. And, after so many severe trials, a peaceful life together consoles them for their sufferings.

The Count de Maugars is reconciled to his son-in-law, and has admitted that he was woefully in the wrong when he behaved so hastily on the wedding day. Souscarrière has not spared himself in bringing about this result, for he indeed had considerable trouble in convincing his old friend that he was to blame from the outset, and that Estelan was an innocent victim. However, the obstinate old count is now beginning to perceive that Madeleine did right in returning to her husband, and he realises that happiness is only to be found in domestic peace. He no longer blames her for having accepted Yvrande's fortune, and no longer talks or thinks of going to end his days in Louisiana. He is staying at La Bretèche, and intends to settle near there for good, when Madeleine buys an estate adjoining Souscarrière's old manor.

Guy de Bauru will not show himself at his uncle's house for some years to come. He will wait till time heals his wound, and, to hasten the cure, he has plunged deeply into the study of military science. He is working at theoretical tactics, and learning Arabic, and he declares that he will not leave Algeria, till he has won his epaulettes. He is a corporal already.

The old Marchioness de Puygarrault has not yet become reconciled to her "little cousin's" marriage. She wished Madeleine had married Guy de Bauru in the first place, and poured forth fire and flame when she learned that she had returned to M. d'Estelan, who had "the gross indelicacy to reappear."

It was necessary to tell her that the plebeian son-in-law had not really died, and that he had behaved in the most gentlemanly manner imaginable; but the secret of Madeleine's birth was withheld from her, and she still wonders why Madame d'Estelan persists in wearing black during the honeymoon. The aggressive old dowager has settled down in the heart of the Faubourg Saint-Germain, and protests that she will never go to La Bretèche, but Madeleine does not despair of coaxing her to change her mind and taking her there next summer.

M. and Madame Aubijoux persevered in their resolution. They have gone to Mexico to live, and they have done wisely. There are cases in which exile is useful.

They have taken Marius Guénégaud with them, and he promises to become a very worthy member of society.

Rascaillon, alias Rangouze, will be tried at the next session of the assizes. He expects to be in prison for a few years to come, but the

prospect does not greatly alarm him. He knows that things soon pass out of memory in Paris, and hopes to go "back to business" in 1886.

Prunevaux has not yet returned to France, but he will eventually do so. His creditors are disposed to content themselves with thirty per cent. of their dues, and all will be quietly arranged. He will not hire any more theatres, but he will find "Grasshoppers" enough to sing at a reduced rate.

Busserrolles is more of a dandy now than ever. He allows it to be supposed that Madame Aubijoux was not altogether cruel, and that he fought a duel with her husband and seriously wounded him. The worthy Aubijoux is not there to contradict him," and Girac upholds his deserving companion, swearing whenever he is not tipsy that Busserrolles is both a great lady-killer and a martial hero.

Don Manoël de Rio-Tinto continues to play at cards with marked success. He has won large sums at Trouville and Dieppe this summer, and it is said that he is going to purchase the villa on the Boulevard de Montmorency. If he does become the lord of that superb domain, poor Antonia, at least, will never behold its splendours. She died three days after Frédoc, and her death was almost dramatic.

While the poor repentant creature was making a worthy end of her life, the Widow Moucheron continued plying her famous "martingale." It was not because she was exactly unfeeling, but because her passion for gambling was an ungovernable one. She divided her time between her dying daughter and her roulette-table. The ball still rolled round the cylinder in the yellow boudoir while Antonia lay at the last gasp upon her canopied bed. Madame Moucheron went from one to the other in turn, and whenever she set the cylinder in motion she had tears in her eyes.

There was also a heart-rending scene when Antonia was laid in her coffin, and old Motifer Moucheron's groans greatly affected the female gamblers around her. At the cemetery they had to seize hold of her to prevent her from throwing herself into her daughter's grave. The poor Grasshopper had a superb funeral, indeed, although only women attended it.

However, everybody in the gay world, both men and women, went to the sale of her furniture, and old Rosine made some excellent bargains on that occasion. The result has enabled Widow Moucheron to gamble more desperately than ever she did before. She bets heavily, and sometimes even attains to the maximum. It is needless to state that she has returned to Monaco, and that the fortune which Antonia left, and which M. de Maugars refused, will soon be locked up in the cash-box of the Monaco bankers, the Blancs, who certainly will not scorn it.

The Widow Moucheron will perhaps live longer than either Souscarrière or Maugars, just as she has survived her daughter, and of a certainty she will ever remain incorrigible. And when Madeleine, a happy mother, blesses Heaven for having given her some lovely children, when Guy de Bautru has become a colonel and the father of a family as well, the Grasshopper's mother will still be pricking her cards with a pin at the gaming table. She will be as withered as a dried leaf in an album. But gambling will preserve her still, for gambling conduces to longevity. Prunevaux himself will unharness some day, perhaps, but the Widow Moucheron will drive "Satan's Coach" for ever.

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